Generative Connections:
Affective Links
in the Media Works of
Cathy Sisler and Lindsay Seers

by

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Abstract

By looking at art by artists who manifest or who self-identify as having psycho-emotional disorders, connections between the artist and the world around them can be uncovered. The definitions of mental health versus mental illness are social and historical constructs. In this paper, the viewer's perception of these artists and their art is contextualized. Current trauma theory refers to art not only as physical manifestations of trauma, but as transmissions of experience that open up spaces for interaction. This framework is applied to the media art of Cathy Sisler and Lindsay Seers who portray experiences of psychological and emotional disturbances. The writings of psychoanalysts, scientists, cognitive scientists, critical and cultural theorists, and art historians are applied to show the obvious and hidden modes through which Sisler and Seers communicate and how they forge empathetic, cognitive and intellectual bridges.

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To John, Max, Nicolette, and Tierney, without whom I would be lost.

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I. Introduction

Contemporary artists who display and explore psycho/emotional disorders in their art, can create spaces for interaction. These spaces form generative connections that exist between the artist, the viewer and the works of art. In this paper, I will argue that two contemporary artists, Cathy Sisler and Lindsay Seers, form a multitude of links through their media works. Historically, conflations of art and mental illness have, at times, led to a pathologizing of the art and a romanticizing of the mentally ill by both medical and art professionals, I will not be diagnosing the artist or their art. Some medical specialists in the late nineteenth century believed that they could diagnose an illness and then enact a cure through the process of art making. Just as problematic as this medical assumption of causality between mental illness or mental health and art, is the myth of the correlation between madness and genius (non-normative behavior and original creative output). In both these "mental health-artistic" output associations, historical and cultural contexts inform the relationship between the subjects and their output. Rather than arguing for a concrete bond between mental health and art making, I will explore contemporary art practices wherein artists, who have self-identified either a mental illness or an emotional/psychological issue, create spaces for forging emotional and intellectual bonds of affect through their art. Both Sisler and Seers, through psychic, intellectual, emotional, and even historical means, fabricate empathetic links between the artist, the viewer and the artworks themselves.

In their media works, both artists allude to a traumatic experience or abnormality in their past. Sisler's series, *Aberrant Motion #1-4* made in the early

1990s, is a group of videos based on the actions of a woman who disrupts public spaces with her spinning motions or physical interventions and, at the same time, narrates her thoughts and feelings. In Sisler's spoken narrative she refers obliquely to a difficult childhood and her inability to fit in. Her mother, who had volunteered at Winnebago Mental Hospital in Oshkosh, Wisconsin, worried about and was scared of Cathy's deviant behavior. Sisler's mother thought that her daughter's "serious" ways "kept her from heterosexual coupling" and would not let her read Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* for fear of reinforcing her already non-normative conduct.[1] Sisler states that she had been "close to being committed for [her] deviant tendencies."[2] As an adult artist, Sisler specifies emotional and psychological anxieties that had occurred during her childhood in her videos. Through her verbal narrative and also through her identification with marginalized portions of society, Sisler consistently casts herself as an outsider: physically, emotionally, and intellectually. Similarly, Lindsay Seers states outright in her video work, *Extramission 6 (Black Maria)*, 2009, that she is searching for a traumatic experience that may have elicited her early childhood eidetic memory.[3] Her art making has been based on her need to either recapture her original, immersive sensory memory or to figure out what had caused her to have this eidetic memory at all. She placed photographic paper in her mouth and used her lips as a shutter, thereby reproducing the camera obscura. She felt that by becoming a camera, she might be able to recapture the original sense of integration with her surroundings that she had lost earlier. In *Extramission 6 (Black Maria)*, Seers films multiple interviewees

[1] Cathy Sisler, *Aberrant Motion #1*, Montreal: 1993.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Lindsay Seers, *Extramission 6 (Black Maria)*, 2009.

who speculate on the possible causes and current effects of her erratic behavior. Her mother frankly discusses her worries about the daughter who did not speak for eight years and her joy when Lindsay did begin to talk. Seers's mother also critiques her daughter's obsession with being a camera; she talks about the pretty landscapes Seers used to paint and the fact that she stopped making them in order to become a camera. Both artists allude to, and at times attempt to work through, their stated childhood traumas. In their art, they throw out lines of explanation and empathy that they hope will be caught by the viewer.

Both Sisler and Seers manifest non-normative behavior that may have been elicited by earlier traumatic experiences. Contemporary trauma theorists posit that the constant revisiting of trauma may in fact be caused only in small part by the actual traumatic event itself. Other factors, such as the reception of loved ones after the event, or even the circumstances surrounding the event itself, can affect a person in the long term.[4] Art theory professor, Jill Bennett writes about the affective quality of art and of the existence of an empathetic transmission in the works of artists that manifest trauma, in her book *Empathic Vision*.[5] The spectator, who understands that she has not been directly traumatized herself, but who can understand the pain being portrayed, receives this "empathic vision." I will argue that the works of Sisler and Seers share this quality of transmission (although it is debatable whether or not

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[4] Sandra L. Bloom, M.D., "Trauma Theory Abbreviated," *Final Action Plan: A Coordinated Community-Based Response to Family Violence, Attorney General of Pennsylvania's Family Violence Task Force*, October 1999, accessed November 12, 2011, http://www.dhs.vic.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0005/587966/trauma_theory_abbreviated_sandra_bloom.pdf.

[5] Jill Bennett, *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005).

the viewer feels empathy towards the subject); a "transmission of experience," whether emotional or intellectual, does exist.[6] An important feature of Bennett's argument lies in the subjective definition of trauma and the contextualization of the traumatic event. Contemporary art expresses an individual artist's own *perception* of traumatic experiences, losses or emotional/psychological issues. The personal subject becomes public. This public space opens up opportunities for others to interact with the subject (both the person and the experience). The "transmission of experience" generates a forum for empathy, understanding or, at the very least, for public scrutiny of personal concerns and inner workings of the artist.

By examining the historical associations between mental illness and art that have changed and developed over time, we can see the deeply ingrained social notions and the intricacies of this particular bond. The attempt to relate the *inner* workings of the human mind with the *outer* appearances of the human body dates back as far as the ancient Greeks. During the late nineteenth century, the study of mentally ill and socially outcast people in relation to their physical appearance became an area that particularly interested scholars and medical professionals.[7] The scientific community attempted to empirically prove the existence of a

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[6] Ibid, 7.

[7] During the late 1800s, Johann Kasper Lavater is credited with the modernist revival of the "science" of physiognomy with his categorization of shadow profiles as reflections of the human soul. A century later, Jean-Martin Charcot, a French neurologist who worked at the Salpêtrière Hospital, photographically documented female patients who were diagnosed as hysterical.
Georges Did-Huberman, *Invention of Hysteria: Charcot and the Photographic Iconography of the Salpêtriere,* translated by Alisa Hartz (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003) and Joan K. Stemmler, "The Physiognomical Portraits of Johann Caspar Lavater," *The Art Bulletin* Vol. 75, No. 1 (March 1993), 151-168, accessed September 26, 2011, http://jstor.org/stable/3045936.

relationship between the psyche of a person and their physical attributes through the documentation of facial features and expressions. Concurrently, doctors and medical professionals began to believe that art had therapeutic power to cure mental and emotional illnesses.[8] Forms of art therapy are present even today in psychiatric institutions where artistic output is used as an insight into the minds of the mentally ill. Drawing on contemporary studies of the social construction of mental illness, I will examine this relationship of inner emotional or psychological turmoil to modes of display in the media works of Sisler and Seers, not from a medical viewpoint but one that illuminates the possibility for generative connections between the artist, their works, and the viewer.

II. Historical and Theoretical Context

A specific set of social and cultural values overlays the modernist belief in the ability of science to define and cure the deviant workings of the human mind. Michel Foucault, in *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, looks at Western society's treatment of, and attitude towards, the mentally ill as a construction of society. He argues that there are two main events in French history that helped create this particular phenomenon: first, in the seventeenth century, the confinement of the poor in the Hôpital Général; and then, at the end of the eighteenth century, the release of inmates from Bicêtre, a "lunatic asylum," back into the population at large. He maintains that the imprisonment of the impoverished and mentally ill created a sense of distance and mystery between the

[8] Charcot not only photographically documented his patients, he also believed in the therapeutic power of art. Using his own drawings and those of his patients, he attempted to diagnose and cure certain neurological diseases. (Didi-Huberman, *Invention of Hysteria: Charcot and the Photographic Iconography of the Salpêtriere*).

public and the inmates. Foucault contends that the institutions originally created to contain leper colonies had replaced those inmates with the poverty stricken and the mentally ill. Within this environment of fear and ignorance, the idea of *illness* in relation to mental health is produced: "Unreason was once more present; but marked now by an imaginary stigma of disease, which added its powers of terror."[9] Foucault asserts that mental illness is a social construct and that medical diagnoses were formed to address this new disease. Because Foucault questions the concept of madness as it is perceived in Western society, the relationship between madness and genius also becomes suspect. Whether non-normative behavior gets diagnosed as mental illness or defined as genius, these labels only refer to the output of the person. The production of art for Sisler and Seers exposes differences between the artists and others around them such that these differences can be seen, explored and explained. Contemporary art practices can occupy a space where personal expression and interpersonal connections occur between the artist, their works and the viewer, regardless of whether the artist has a medical diagnosis of illness or a social diagnosis of genius.

Even as more varied definitions of mental health in contemporary society are being explored, older forms of representation are still prevalent, as seen in the stereotypes reproduced in print, television and on the web. Simon Cross writes in his book, *Mediating Madness: Mental Distress and Cultural Representation*, "…contemporary media images silence or censure the lived experience of mental

[9]Michel Foucault, *Madness & Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason,* translated by Richard Howard (New York: Vintage Books, 1988), 205.

distress."[10] Agreeing with Foucault, Cross maintains that when the physical walls of the asylum no longer contain the mad from the sane, "*symbolic boundaries* help assuage anxiety about those whom we suspect are 'not like us.'"[11] According to Foucault and Cross, the public has a need to differentiate – to create limits either physically (as in institutions) or visually (as in the stereotypical negative imagery of mental illness). When the subject of madness in conjunction with violence is broached, images of unkempt people, such as the image of Charles Manson with long hair and a tattooed cross on his forehead, come to mind. Contemporary mediated images of mass murderers who are mentally ill include Timothy McVeigh of the Oklahoma City bombing from 1995 and more recently Anders Breivik who massacred over ninety people in Norway last year. They both have short, almost shaved hair and a zealot-like intensity in their expressions. Most media outlets have published photographs of these two men with serious expressions or in poses of aggression (the neo-Nazi symbol of the raised clenched fist in Brievik's case and the mostly incarcerated pictures of McVeigh in prison garb). Cross argues that the mediation of madness feeds the public's imagination and then that *perceived* image of madness becomes reality. Happy family photographs of such criminals are not disseminated because humanizing the mentally ill or the emotionally disturbed murderers would create a conflict within the public's perception of that man's personality and humanity. One way to create boundaries between good and evil, us and them, is to objectify the "other" the acceptance of which remains an ongoing struggle for society.

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[10] Simon Cross, *Mediating Madness: Mental Distress and Cultural Representation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 4.
[11] Ibid, 148.

Media can perpetuate the myth of the insane person who rants and raves in public or is marked by physical difference, but this particular myth occurs in a specific, modern timeframe. Sander Gilman, a historian who wrote *Health and Illness: Images of Difference*, maintains that images of health and illness are social constructs based on ideas of beauty and ugliness contextualized within a given historical moment.[12] Not referring to the mentally ill person but to their artistic output, Gilman describes the historical and scientific analysis of outsider art as being mostly about cultural context, about scholars' fascination with what the art shows about the historical moment in which it was made, rather than a psychological profile of the patient. He calls for a broader reading of art that would include multiple meanings. "What has been lacking is a comprehensive sense of the function that images can have in the contemporary study of the history of health and illness as it is practiced today."[13] Although Gilman is specifically referring to images used in a medical context, I will address and adapt his idea of multiple, "correct" readings of contemporary art through analyses of Sisler's and Seers's videos. Each of my readings creates its own set of connections; these links, when tied together, will establish a multi-layered understanding of Sisler's and Seers's works, not to be defined in one genre.

Art historians and cultural theorists, such as Mieke Bal, Rosalind Krauss and Peggy Phelan, have examined various relationships between the psyche and the creation of art. Cultural theorist Bal curated and produced works and exhibitions specifically on the issue of formal psychoanalysis and the image. In a 2011

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[12] Sander L. Gilman, *Health and Illness: Images of Difference* (London: Reaktion Books, 1995).
[13] Ibid, 20.

exhibition titled *Landscapes of Madness*, Bal questions the Freudian assumption that people with psychosis cannot be cured by psychoanalysis. We can trace her interest in this subject to earlier writings in which Bal looks at the fraught relationship between psychoanalysis and art history in an article titled "Dreaming Art" from 2006.[14] Art historian Rosalind Krauss discusses the concept of visuality and the relationship between the subconscious and art making. Peggy Phelan, a professor of drama and English at Stanford University, posits that the ephemerality of performance can mimic a sense of loss or trauma that cannot be expressed through other, more concrete mediums. Bal, Krauss and Phelan look at the relationship between the psychology of art making and the end product.

As tempting as it might be to psychoanalyze a work of art, the literal psychoanalysis of an artwork is not possible, for art is not a living subject. Psychoanalysis can only exist as a process between two people. Bal writes of the problematic relationship between art history and psychoanalysis in "Dreaming Art," a chapter in the book *Psychoanalysis and the Image*.[15] She states that the basic problem with the integration of these two disciplines is that the process of psychoanalysis is just that – a process involving the interaction between the analysand and the therapist. Although she questions how an image, an inanimate object, can be analyzed, Bal does posit a possible connection between the process of analyzing art and the process of psychoanalysis.

> Perhaps the most precious aspect of psychoanalytic attention is its indifference to objective time…The time of analysis can feel fast or exasperatingly slow, but it is always palpable. In a world so riddled with

[14] Mieke Bal, "Dreaming Art," in *Psychoanalysis and the Image: Transdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Griselda Pollock (Malden: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2006).
[15] Ibid.

> speed and visual overload, the slow-down inherent in psychoanalysis is especially important for the study of visual culture.[16]

Bal is arguing for a deeper, slower reading of art that reflects the process of psychoanalysis rather than a reading that psychoanalyzes the actual work. I contend that a multiplicity of therapist/analysand relationships exist between the artist and her art and the viewer of the art. Through a deeper examination of their works, I will uncover ways in which Sisler and Seers create spaces for these connections.

Art historian and critic Rosalind Krauss discusses issues of artistic representation in her article "Im/pulse to See," where she argues for a definition of visuality that includes not just vision, but also space and time.[17] Krauss claims that space, and particularly time, work to destabilize the visual image. She explores a certain rhythm within vision, not based solely on the sense of sight, but visuality as a cognitive process whereby humans need to negotiate between the imaginary and the real. Integral to her explanation of how these elements interact is Jean-François Lyotard's concept of the matrix.

> Belonging to the unconscious, the matrix is the form of the primary process as it operates invisibly, behind the constraints of repression, such that only its fantasmatic products ever surface onto the field of the visible. The matrix can, then, only be inferred, only be reconstructed from the figuration provided by fantasy.[18]

Art can be understood as an outlet for these "fantasmatic products" of the unconscious. Being careful again to not psychoanalyze the art, yet to recognize the importance of the artist's mind within the work, it can be seen that both Sisler and

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[16] Ibid, 55.
[17] Rosalind Krauss, "Impulse to See," in *Vision and Visuality: Discussions in Contemporary Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Seattle: Bay Press, 1988).
[18] Ibid, 64.

Seers utilize imagery and verbal narrative, as well as built structures, to craft their "fantasmatic products" into real experiences. They show glimpses of underlying personal stresses, emotional traumas, and past experiences through their art such that the viewer is engrossed by his/her affective encounter.

Pain, trauma, loss, and emotional instability, are ephemeral. Emotions and ideas can be discussed but they cannot be packaged and presented; they cannot be precisely copied and reproduced. Peggy Phelan goes so far as to say that "Trauma is untouchable…it cannot be represented. The symbolic cannot carry it: trauma makes a tear in the symbolic network itself."[19] She is describing the insufficiency of semiotics, and of human communicative tools in general, to accurately represent trauma. Both Phelan's description of the "untouchable" and Krauss's "fantasmatic products" have similar geneses in their allusions to the area of our psyche that is not rational, comprehensible or easily visible. For Phelan, performance art can repeat that certain sense of loss, through its own ephemeral quality, thereby creating an opportunity for assuaging the sense of loss. She posits that mimicry is our society's attempt to stave off loss:

> At the heart of mimicry is a fear that the match will not hold and the 'thing itself' (you, me, love, art) will disappear before we can reproduce it…. In this mimicry, loss itself helps transform the repetitive force of trauma and might bring about a way to overcome it.[20]

Trauma can be circumscribed through the transient experience of performance art, for the sense of loss inherent in performance may be a way to control those feelings of overwhelming trauma. Whereas Phelan and Krauss examine the origins of art in

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[19] Peggy Phelan, *Mourning Sex: Performing Public Memories* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 5.
[20] Ibid, 12.

trauma and the psyche, Jill Bennett looks at the art product associated with trauma. Bennett argues for a "transactive" understanding of this art, rather than only a "communicative" one.[21] She states that "the affective responses engendered by artworks are not born of emotional identification or sympathy; rather, they emerge from a direct engagement with sensation as it is registered in the work."[22] Bennett sees the value of not only the viewer's empathetic response to the art but also a more "conceptual engagement." She refers to Gilles Deleuze's suggestion that an emotional response could be the spark for a deeper understanding or inquiry into the subject.[23] I contend that in the work of Cathy Sisler and Lindsay Seers, covert and overt references to trauma create liaisons with the viewer and that this link can be socially curative, through their affective call and our primary emotional response and also our cognitive interaction.

While the viewer emotionally and intellectually negotiates through the artist's representation of self, the viewer also needs to be reminded that the art is not the same as the artist. Amelia Jones, in *Self/Image: Technology, Representation and the Contemporary Subject*, explores the relationship between the self and the image of that self as represented in technology. Jones states that artists have historically utilized representational technologies to experiment with notions of subjectivity.

> It has consistently been those people we call artists who push these technologies to limits that otherwise wouldn't or couldn't have been imagined in order to interrogate the very limits of subjectivity itself. While not all of these images and projects are "self portraits" in the traditional

[21] Bennett, *Empathic Vision,* 7.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Ibid.

> sense, all of them enact the self (and most often the artist her or himself) in the context of the visual and performing arts.[24]

Rather than referring to the unconscious genesis of the art as Krauss and Phelan do, Jones tackles the area of representation of those ideas and emotions through imaging technologies. The advent of these technologies, starting in the late nineteenth century, created new areas for exploration and depictions of the self. During the second half of the twentieth century video technology became more portable and easier to use. The proliferation of video art, due mainly to the widespread dissemination of handheld video cameras, launched a new art discipline for artists, both men and women. Along with the physical changes to video equipment, an emphasis on individual forms of expression helped force a wedge for video into the established world of art history. As Doug Hall and Sally Jo Fifer explain in their comprehensive book on the history of video, *Illuminating Video: An Essential Guide to Video Art*, the "emphasis on experience and sensibilities of the individual and therefore upon 'expression' as emblematic of personal freedom and this as an end in itself, provided an opening for the assimilation of video – as 'video art'— into existing art-world structures."[25] Through this new opening into the stable, mostly masculine structure of the art-making world of the 1960s and '70s, women artists were able to explore self-representations. The works of Cathy Sisler and Lindsay Seers are not necessarily self-portraits or autobiographies, yet they "enact the self" through the insertion of their physical bodies or the subject of themselves into the spoken text.

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[24] Amelia Jones, *Self/Image: Technology, Representation and the Contemporary Subject* (New York: Routledge, 2006), xvii.
[25] Doug Hall and Sally Jo Fifer, eds. *Illuminating Video: An Essential Guide to Video Art* (New York: Aperture Foundation, Inc., 1990), 32.

Sisler and Seers fabricate environments within their videos and installations that lure the viewer into a relationship with their work. Cathy Sisler creates an all-encompassing narrative through a combination of her videography and voiceovers. Although sometimes the two features are contradictory in tone, together they work to explicate and uncover the thoughts and feelings of the spinning woman. The non-normative subject in Sisler's videos explores her feelings and thoughts through her words; the juxtaposition of the two aspects draws the viewer into a place where connections to the spinning woman are possible. Lindsay Seers not only plumbs the depths of her personal past, she also references the history of new media, the social history of ventriloquists, of "thoughtographs," of diamond smugglers, and even of Elizabethan theatrical productions, to stimulate contemplations on the human condition. She creates a world around herself and the viewer that envelops the subject, the work and the viewer in fantasy and reality such that a suspension of disbelief is possible. In this state of suspension, the viewer is more open to connecting with the art. Both Cathy Sisler and Lindsay Seers through their art, create spaces of generative connections – links from the artist to the works and to the viewer.

II. Cathy Sisler

Cathy Sisler induces empathetic reactions by setting up binary opposites and then bridging the gap between the opposites. The binaries she explores include the idea of control and loss of control, animate and inanimate subjects and objects, public and private spaces, non-normative behaviors vs. socially acceptable actions, as well as psychological states vs. physical movements. Sometimes Sisler simply

exposes these binaries without attempting any negotiation; she uncovers the two opposites and allows the viewer to feel the discomfort inherent within the opposition. In this way, she prompts a different kind of reaction in the viewer – rather than a sympathetic one – a realization of difference, a feeling of slight anxiety. Art historian Kim Sawchuk suggests in her article, "Out of Step: Cathy Sisler's Risky Deviations," that "Sisler's works explore tactics for negotiating survival in a world that can be dangerous for the aberrant female subject, rather than falsely promising a general strategy for all women, in all situations."[26] Negotiating this "dangerous" world involves relations with other people. These troubled relationships can be expressed in terms of emotions, therefore they can evoke reactive emotions or provoke physical reactions, both of which illustrate modes of relating to others. I will look at the binaries of space, both physical and psychological, and the strategies Sisler utilizes to survive in this "dangerous" world. Either by simply exposing the opposition so that the space between them is opened up or by using spanning mechanisms, such as humour and narrative, Sisler creates bridges between the binary concepts as well as connections to the viewer.

In 1993, Sisler created a series of videos entitled *Aberrant Motion #1-4* (See Figures 1-6, pages 16-18.) that clearly delineate her negotiations for survival. As the title of the works suggests, the unifying concept of the series exposes the deviant or non-normative actions of a woman who disrupts public spaces while trying to

[26] Kim Sawchuk, "Out of Step: Cathy Sisler's Risky Deviations," *Inversions* (Fall 1998): 19.

maneuver through them.[27] The series is disjointed, difficult to read and at times uncomfortable to watch. My analysis of Sisler's works necessarily reflects this disorganization. I must also acknowledge that this organizational incoherence

[27] Sisler utilizes her own body in *Aberrant Motion #1, #2 and #4*. In *Aberrant Motion #3*, a different woman, Franny Ruvinsky becomes the aberrant woman who disrupts public spaces.

Figure 1. Cathy Sisler, *Aberrant Motion #1*, 1993, courtesy of VTape, Toronto, ON.

Figure 2. Cathy Sisler, *Aberrant Motion* #2, 1993, courtesy of VTape, Toronto, ON.

Figure 3. Cathy Sisler, *Aberrant Motion #3*, 1993, courtesy of VTape, Toronto, ON

Figure 4. Cathy Sisler, *Aberrant Motion #1*, 1993, courtesy of VTape, Toronto, ON.

Figure 5. Cathy Sisler, *Aberrant Motion* #4, 1993, courtesy of VTape, Toronto, ON.

Figure 6. Cathy Sisler, *Aberrant Motion* #2, 1993, courtesy of VTape, Toronto, ON.

produces part of the allure of her works. The protagonist physically interrupts spaces while her spoken thoughts are fragmented. The spinning woman in *Aberrant Motion #1* revolves around in circles on busy sidewalks of downtown Montreal; she then attempts to negotiate the urban landscape within an architectural structure in *Aberrant Motion #2: Unmooring the Structure: the Spinning Woman Disguised as a Stability Delusion*. The last in the series, *Aberrant Motion #4* comprised of five shorter pieces, *Face Story, Stagger Stories, Three Stagger Stories in Succession, Surrender, Learning to Walk*, features the figure of Sisler staggering down alleyways and deserted streets. In *Aberrant Motion #3*, Franny Ruvinsky variously spins in public places while tightly holding on to a box of balls that she periodically lets loose. Overlaying the visual movements, Sisler narrates in a non-affected voice, thoughts, facts, wishes, dreams, and stories. The action is played out on two levels, one visual and one aural; very rarely are the two synchronized. Sisler uses binaries as her main mode of generating connections, between the artist, the work and the viewer. Although raw visually, the videos are carefully crafted messages of an artist continually reaching out to the viewer, showing us how the spinning woman has survived.

One way of reading Sisler's videos involves looking at the types of transmissions she uses to engage the viewer, visually, aurally and cognitively. Just as art historian Christine Ross studies the aesthetics of depression in contemporary art and not art as a symptom of depression, Sisler's works can be understood to reinterpret the relationship between subject and viewer. Ross's book, *The Aesthetics of Disengagement: Contemporary Art and Depression*, sets up parameters on how to

examine works of art that manifest depressive qualities. She does not argue for a comprehensive reading of this art but for one that unveils the creative attributes of the subject. It is a widely held belief that depression causes a lack of creativity and productivity. The art that Ross examines manifests depression through a lack of movement or a slowing down of a usually repetitive movement. Ross is careful to point out that the art itself is not depressed but that the "aesthetics of disengagement" are characteristic of depression. She argues that art can reinterpret relations when the depressive effect is stressed more than the actual content.[28] Many different relations are put into question when the subject detaches – "the viewer's connection to the image but also intersubjectivity, communication, community, interpellation, and still more important, the attachment to the other."[29] This framework and approach to analyzing contemporary art can be applied to works manifesting mental or emotional trauma. Rather than using the disengagement of depression, Sisler and Seers use modes of transmission to interpellate the viewer, to invite them into a space where s/he can connect to the art and to the portrayal of the artist's psyche.

Sisler portrays mental instability as a physical struggle for control over the body. As Peggy Phelan suggests when writing about the ephemerality of performance as a reflection of loss, the aberrant woman's performance of spinning and staggering mimic the psychological duress that she feels. The performance does not literally recreate the instability, but it does evoke the emotional and psychological trauma through a physical device. In her videos, the spinning and

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[28] Christine Ross, *The Aesthetics of Disengaement: Contemporary Art and Depression* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 157.
[29] Ibid, xxii.

staggering woman disrupts, insists on recognition, and then compels the viewer to engage. She interrupts the flow of pedestrian traffic yet her rotations have their own lyrical rhythm and flow. For the narrator "the spinning is the insistence of self among others *without conformity*" (emphasis mine).[30] She is calling for recognition of her imperfect self, asking for acceptance despite, or even because of, her difference. While on the visual surface the spinning woman is disruptive, she is reaching out, attempting to generate connections to the world around her (specifically to the viewer for they are the only ones who have access to the voice over, not the audience she encounters on the street in the performance). As the narrator in *Aberrant Motion #1* says:

> These disruptions of the conventions of linear walking do not stop the motion of a person through space; rather a whole new form of complex movement is achieved. But this form of motion is seen as a deviation and the staggerer is stigmatized in our society. The staggerer is seen as someone who has lost control, who is no longer under control.[31]

The spinning woman in *Aberrant Motion #1*, along with the staggering woman in *Aberrant Motion #4*, are both marked by actions of deviance. Sisler is advocating for the acceptance of this "new form of complex movement." Although ostensibly opposite forms of normative movement, the underlying similarity of the forward motion between staggering and linear walking reflects the underlying similarities among all humans, no matter how we propel ourselves forward.[32]

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[30] Cathy Sisler, *Aberrant Motion #1*, Montreal: 1993.
[31] Cathy Sisler, *Aberrant Motion #4: Stagger Stories*, Montreal: 1993.
[32] The idea of the movement of our bodies through space as being intimately connected with our psyche (somatic awareness) dates back to the 1930s in modern dance theory with Mabel Todd's notion of the "thinking body." Both the Feldenkreis and the Alexander methods also capitalize on this interrelationship

For Sisler, controlling her body is extremely important because this control reflects her ability to blend into the rest of society. According to the spinning woman in *Aberrant Motion #1*, in extreme states of psychosis everything starts to move and spin and then eventually fall apart. She needs to hold tightly onto her box of rage and anger (*Aberrant Motion #3*) or she might lose her marbles (literally her box of balls). Movement and motion: there is a danger of losing control through (e)motion at the same time that forward movement through space saves the staggering woman from a loss of control. "Sometimes it feels like my body can't hold me and something unspeakable is going to break out, something that would undo all of this tedious control from which there would be no going back."[33] Sawchuk states in relation to Sisler's work, that "aberrant is an adjective that applies both to our external movements through public space and to our internal process of change, our constantly mutating subjectivity and identity."[34] When the subject has emotional and/or psychological volatility, this quicksand of constantly changing subjectivity and identity creates an unstable physical *and* psychological foundation. Sisler blurs the line between physical control and psychological outbursts.

In her videos, Sisler forces animate and inanimate parts to collide into a compound made up of thoughts and car parts. Sisler fuses her body, her thoughts and inanimate objects (cars) into a confusion of parts and power. In *Aberrant Motion #1,* she spins and dances in front of a blank wall wearing a white dress, with a mask of silver paint on her face. (See Figure 1.) While dancing, the narrator speaks

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between the body and the mind, by training the mind to be more aware of the body in order to facilitate movements.

[33] Cathy Sisler, *Aberrant Motion #4: Learning to Walk*, Montreal: 1993.

[34] Sawchuk, "Out of Step: Cathy Sisler's Risky Deviations," 20.

of her ideas and thoughts as if they were cars racing by in traffic. Her silver face paint is similar to the metal of the car, inert and nonliving. Talking about cars at intersections, Sisler says "any closer and it would be like one of those accidents where both ideas keep scraping into one another leaving bits of metal shaved off, sparks, slivers of chrome and paint."[35] Sisler conflates and confuses ideas and cars, melding them into one subject just as she combines physical and psychological tensions. Her motions are unnerving to watch as they disrupt the quotidian pedestrian flow when she spins on a busy Montreal sidewalk. The metaphor of her thoughts morphing into solid vehicles that need to negotiate moving traffic reflects her anxiety of negotiating the world. She uses the opposites of living subjects and ideas conflated with nonliving objects to help expose her personal negotiations of public spaces.

In *Aberrant Motion #2*, Sisler takes this melding of animate and inanimate, personal and public into another performance whereby she transforms herself into a piece of architecture. Carrying a large wooden structure that resembles an oversized dreidel, Sisler navigates the streets of Montreal attempting to become solid, a "stability delusion."[36] (See Figure 2.) While exploring human representation as other than human, Sisler maintains a sense of humour that allows the viewer access to her metaphors. Rather than a statement that becomes incomprehensible because of its adamant adherence to absolute values, her humour softens the often-confusing parallels between herself and the inanimate. As Amelia Jones suggests in *Body Art/Performing the Subject*, all performance has a degree of self-portraiture;

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[35] Sisler, *Aberrant Motion #1*.
[36] Sisler, *Aberrant Motion #2*, Montreal: 1993.

for Sisler this portraiture is the physical manifestation of her feelings of difference.[37] By allowing for the personification of ideas and objects, Sisler opens the viewer up to the inner workings of her mind, to the various types of connections she is capable of making (both inanimate/animate and possible connection to the viewer). Through humour, Sisler constructs a point of access for the viewer to her thoughts and her visibly odd body. In this case, humour diffuses the oddness of her body contained within a wooden structure and of Sisler's actions, by forming a bridge between the viewer and the woman within the stability structure.

A different point of intersection between the physical and the narrative segments of Sisler's videos encompasses a metaphysical space. The movements of the spinning woman's thoughts and body form generative connections because they become the beginning of a process rather than the embodiment of a solid idea. The visual and aural sections together broadcast a message. The actions of the spinning/staggering woman create their own stories, while the narrative element in Sisler's videos forms a parallel, yet at times asynchronous, storyline; Sisler introduces the first *Aberrant Motion* video with these words:

> The ideas are going back and forth very fast. I feel the air caused by their velocity moving across my face. The concepts are identifiable, though some move faster than others, it's not a total blur. It's not the kind of traffic I can wander casually into though. [38]

The comparison of her thoughts to the traffic surrounding her resonates with Henri Bergson's definition of das Ding (the thing) and the processes of thought. John Mullarkey, professor of philosophy at Kingston University, London, England, writes

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[37] Amelia Jones, *Body Art/Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 13.
[38] Sisler, *Aberrant Motion #1*.

in his introduction to Bergson's *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, that Bergson defines thought "as something *that things do to themselves.*"[39] In other words, thoughts are not things in and of themselves, nor do they define a thing: thoughts emanate from a thing, are part of the thing itself. More pertinent to Sisler's use of the analogy between her ideas and moving vehicles, things are not things:

> This thing is not a thing, but a process. It is not a substance but movement or pure variability…. What is in question is a movement, a process, or a phase, moving outwards and inwards, centrifugally and centripetally, the thing going away from itself and returning to itself as thought turns on its own direction to become intuition.[40]

Sisler's ideas and thoughts are in constant movement. She is intrigued by motion, which is, according to Bergson, what things are or how we think of the world around us. Throughout the *Aberrant Motion* videos, Sisler verbally repeats her fascination with movement and motion. She attempts to capture the flow of people moving in and out of buildings by becoming a structural construction, a stability delusion, conflating thoughts and things. The spinning woman who says she is fascinated by physics and studying motion, scatters and then collects balls; these objects physically manifest her emotions and ideas.

Sigmund Freud describes repetition compulsion as the revisiting of traumatic events—sometimes forgotten, sometimes repressed, sometimes fully in the conscious level—by people when they have not fully worked through some sort

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[39] Henri Bergson, *An Introduction to Metaphysics (With an Introduction by John Mullarkey),* trans. T.E. Hulme, ed. John Mullarkey and Michael Kolkman, (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave and Macmillan, 2007), xi.
[40] Ibid.

of trauma.[41] Freud's belief was that the only way out of this repetition compulsion was through psychoanalysis. As Michel Foucault points out in *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, this definition of sickness and health and the linear progression from one to the other is a social and cultural construction in European society at the turn of the last century.[42] Contemporary artists who exhibit non-normative behaviors and who employ repetition as a manifestation of traumatic experience need not fall into Freud's strict criteria and regimen of mental health. Just as Rosalind Krauss and Peggy Phelan refer to the role of psychology in art making without psychoanalyzing the artist, I believe that the works of Sisler and Lindsay Seers can be read as a kind of generative repetition *without* the intervention of the formal process of psychoanalysis or its strict definitions of mental illness. The basic premise in psychoanalysis that hidden areas exist within the mind that bubble up periodically, pertains to my reading of the certain experiences that occur in Sisler's and Seers's works. I have already discussed Krauss's use of Lyotard's matrix as a basis for "fantasmatic products" that arise from our subconscious. Medical professionals, such as Michael Kahn, a psychologist and instructor of Freudian psychoanalytical techniques, believe in the strong impact of our hidden subconscious struggles in our everyday lives:

> Perhaps the most important thing Freud contributed to our understanding of ourselves was that the greatest part of mental and emotional life is hidden, that consciousness is a small part of the human mind. Motives are concealed, feelings are buried, conflicting forces struggle out of sight.[43]

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[41] Michael Kahn in *Basic Freud: Psychoanalytic Thought for the 21st Century* (New York: Basic Books, 2002) references Freud's essay "Remembering, Repeating, Working-Through."
[42] Foucault, *Madness & Civilization*.
[43] Kahn, *Basic Freud: Psychoanalytic Thought for the 21st Century*, 204.

Being careful not to take on the role of a therapist or to analyze a work of art, I contend that the creation of art has, at the very least, a kernel emanating from these hidden struggles. Many different components comprise a person's essence – psychological, emotional, and physical, some hidden and some more obvious – from these various components individuality arises. Art is derived from and can also reflect this complex network of elements.

According to Freudian psychoanalytic theory, repetition compulsion is the attempt by the patient to revisit trauma, hence the repetitive movements of Sisler's body could be a physical indicator of her psychic and emotional turmoil. In *Aberrant Motion #1*, Sisler inserts her large frame into a busy sidewalk, seemingly oblivious to passersby, and spins in circles. In *Aberrant Motion #2*, although she does not spin nearly as much as in the first video, Sisler dominates the sidewalk with a large construction that she carries around day after day. Then in *Aberrant Motion #4*, she staggers rather than spins. Ruvinsky spins clutching at her box of balls and repeatedly lets the balls go, in *Aberrant Motion #3*. (See Figure 3.) The repetitive actions of the females in Sisler's videos directly reference contemporary notions of a mentally ill or chemically dependent person: spinning on the sidewalk, staggering down alleys, clutching a box of balls then dropping them. Psychoanalysis, as Freud developed it, can help people work through their traumatic experiences. Michael Kahn posits that the relationship between the psychoanalyst and the patient has the ability to help the patient just as much as the therapy itself.

> Psychodynamic therapists now understand that the healing power of the therapeutic relationship itself is as great as the power of bringing

> unconscious forces to the surface. Understanding how these work together has produced a quantum leap in therapeutic effectiveness.[44]

Obviously, no psychoanalyst exists within Sisler's videos. Yet, through the stories she tells, Sisler mitigates her compulsive actions thereby performing analysis on herself. If, as Kahn states, the *relationship* between the therapist and the patient is of paramount importance in the process of working through experiences, then Sisler attempts to work through her experiences by enacting the repetition and simultaneously explaining and reacting to her own actions. Her dual role as patient and therapist conflates the binary of mental illness and its supposed cure. Sisler establishes her own dynamic therapeutic relationship and simultaneously draws the viewer further into her psyche.

So far, I have analyzed Sisler's negotiations of her psychological state with her physical movements, as a metaphysical relationship between inanimate objects and thoughts and through her concurrent embodiment of patient and therapist. The binaries she evokes involve connections with her psychological state and its physical manifestations. Sisler is able to induce empathy despite the non-normative actions of her protagonists. They purposefully intrude in public spaces producing a sense of anxiety, with the voiceover assuaging this anxiety. Disruptions are found in many different forms – political and artistic. These imposed pauses into the daily lives and actions of the interrupted viewer in the video force a space of interaction. As Sisler's personal disruptions of public spaces garner attention, political interventions also bring public attention to issues. Most recently in 2011 (and now again in 2012), the Occupy Movement commandeered public squares in cities across

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[44] Kahn, *Basic Freud: Psychoanalytic Thought for the 21st Century,* 202.

North America to protest the economic oppression by the wealthiest one percent of the population that controls the majority of wealth in the United States. Disruptions of everyday actions and interventions into public spaces force the public to stop and reassess its actions and movements (or at least that is the hope with political interventions). Artists have also used this tactic of disruption to unsettle others and to force interactions. During the early 1970s, conceptual artist Adrian Piper in her series of works, *Catalysis*, went about her normal activities but with obvious changes to her person in order to force an interaction between herself and others. In *Catalysis I*, Piper soaked her clothes in a putrid mixture of vinegar, eggs and other equally pungent ingredients for a week; she then walked around a bookstore and rode the subway in these clothes. By becoming the art object, she became the spectacle. At the same time she held a certain power over the people around her: she was both the object and the subject.

> Her dual role as artist and artwork allowed the entire art making process to be internalized in her rather than in a separate and discrete object. Her self-objectification turned her into a spectacle, but, paradoxically, this enabled her to function as a subjective agency capable of affecting change in others.[45]

Piper named the series of works *Catalysis* to emphasize the catalytic effect her art making process had on the relationship between the artist and the viewer. This face-to-face, forced interaction circumvented the "normal" interaction between the artist, who created an object that is then looked at by the viewer with no visceral relationship between the producer and the consumer of the work. Through her use of shock (Piper went through ordinary actions of shopping, commuting, etc. with

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[45] Jayne Wark, "Conceptual Art and Feminism: Martha Rosler, Adrian Piper, Eleanor Antin, and Martha Wilson," *Woman's Art Journal*, vol. 22, no. 1 (Spring – Summer 2001): 45.

various props: a red towel stuffed in her mouth, loud burping sounds played on a hidden tape recorder), Piper felt that she was able to connect with others through her art on an affective level. Both the Occupy Movement and Piper's interventions generate spaces for dialogue and interaction. The public or viewer is coerced into reacting. These connections are not possible during the normal flow of life. Only when flow gets interrupted can a space for interactions and connections exist; the pauses are productive.

Similar to Piper and the Occupy demonstrators, Sisler disrupts public spaces around her through the actions of the body (Sisler's and Franny Ruvinsky's). Rather than inviting (or looked at another way, daring) a person to interact as Piper did, Sisler reiterates social conventions and ideas of madness such as the images to which Simon Cross refers, thereby creating a distance between herself and the people around her, pushing away the passersby rather than interacting with them. Her actions rebuff dealings with people while concurrently compelling the viewer to watch her antisocial behavior. Cross argues that images of madness in contemporary media reinforce historically-dated, modernist notions of mental illness. "The conventionalized formats of news produce a standardized template that condition how stories are scripted."[46] Sisler plays on these socially accepted notions of physical madness as she wanders the streets and stations of Montreal spinning and staggering, carrying large constructions or clutching boxes. (See Figure 4.) In the production of her videos, two levels of spectatorship are at work whereby we can see Sisler's ability to the bridge dualities between socially non-normative appearances and actions to the inner emotional struggles of the spinning

[46] Simon Cross, *Mediating Madness: Mental Distress and Cultural Representation*, 97.

woman. One is in the same temporal plane as Sisler's action. During the shooting of the video, when she is physically on the streets, she reinforces the mediated images of mental illness and is incapable of inducing real relations with anyone. Yet the passersby are conscious of the filming taking place, so that their reactions to the spinning woman are tempered; they are likely not genuine reactions. The second level of spectatorship is on the aesthetic level of the video, when a viewer watches her actions and listens to the thoughts and stories being told in a gallery, he or she achieves a different level of understanding. Sisler's aberrant movements are explained in terms of her thoughts. Empathy for the subject comes about from a cognitive understanding of the visual situation before the viewer. When the box of balls obsessively clutched by Ruvinsky is likened to her rages that she finds difficult to control, we are less afraid of the strange actions of the woman because of the verbal explanation behind them.

> It is like carrying something around with me in a box. It feels explosive, attached to my insides, like I'm wired. It belongs to me. I can't just abandon it. It ticks like a bomb. It measures time. It palpitates. It is sensitive to all movement around me. I wonder if everyone…[47]

Her rages become comprehensible on a sympathetic level, for who has not felt deep anger? I can attempt to finish her thoughts when she wonders aloud "if everyone…," as perhaps being "has this same seed of anger." She hesitantly reaches out, looking for common ground. This quality endears Sisler's characters to the viewer. The connections that Sisler generates in her art making are not only on the primary, physical level as in Piper's *Catalysis*, but also exist on a cognitive level. She accesses cognitive empathies through verbal explanations despite the fact that the

[47] Cathy Sisler, *Aberrant Motion #3*, Montreal: 1993.

contrary actions of the women physically separate the bystanders in the work from the spinning woman or because of the interruptive quality of her movements. Sisler is able to affectively touch the viewer through the duality of actions and storytelling.

Sisler conjures up a binary between public and private spaces in her videos between which the spinning woman must navigate. Yet the spaces that the protagonists physically traverse are transitory places: train stations, bus stations, alleyways, hallways, and empty lots, indicating an instability that is even more difficult to negotiate. Each of these areas denotes a form of movement, transition, a space through which to move. A single woman maneuvering through these public spaces can feel threatened or oppressed as her private world collides with the public one.[48] In her article "Video: Shedding the Utopian Moment," the artist Martha Rosler writes of the integration of popular media (television) into the canon of the art world as a point of contact between the public and the private: a public intervention into private lives. "The positioning of the individual in the world of the 'private' over and against the 'public' space of the mass is constantly in question in modern culture."[49] According to Rosler this transference of poetry, of aesthetic information, constantly interrogates the relationship between the private world and public space.

> Yet this emphasis on the experience and sensibilities of the individual and therefore upon 'expression' as emblematic of personal freedom and this as

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[48] Janet Wolff, in "On the Road Again: Metaphors of Travel in Cultural Criticism," *Cultural Studies*, vol. 7, no. 2 (1993): 224-240, critiques the predominantly masculine metaphors of travel in cultural studies yet she holds out hope that it may be possible to reappropriate these metaphors "to expose their implicit meanings in play, and produce the possibility of subverting those meanings by thinking against the grain."

[49] Martha Rosler, "Video: Shedding the Utopian Moment," in *Illuminating Video: An Essential Guide to Video Art*, eds. Doug Hall and Sally Jo Fifer (New York: Aperture Foundation, 1990), 32.

> an end in itself, provided an opening for the assimilation of video – as 'video art' – into existing art-world structures."[50]

Sisler positions her videos into this small opening between public and private, inserting her work into the "existing art-world structures." She manipulates inner private moments and thoughts with the bulky outer movements of her female protagonists to create works that question socially constructed differences and to give agency to the female subjects. In *Aberrant Motion #2*, the spinning woman disguised as a stability device sits in her apartment watching a static-filled television screen. Unfortunately for her, she is unable to read the broadcast signals, so she attempts to simulate normal interactions. She intervenes into public spaces by walking on the sidewalks inserted into the stability device. She tries to be a part of the normal flow of pedestrian rush hour traffic and to enter office buildings, but of course she cannot because of the large wooden structure in which she is ensconced. Simultaneously, she is narrating the hopeful thoughts and feelings of the aberrant woman whose only wish is to be a member of society. The spinning woman continually spins and walks, attempting to insert herself into the public somehow. Sisler alludes to the transference of inner private ideas, thoughts and feelings to outer public spaces by situating her protagonists in transitory spaces. She generates connections between opposing worlds through her insistence on the movement between the two worlds.

Sisler at times attempts to explicate transitions to establish a connective space and at other times she emphasizes opposites in order to clearly show the chasm between the binaries. An instance of Sisler's exposition of binaries, rather

[50] Ibid.

than bridging between them, is her exploration of the theme of homelessness, of transitional spaces. As some of new media artist, David Rokeby's video installations of street scenes, such as *Guardian Angel, See* and *Watch*, document, the only obviously inert figures in his public spaces are inanimate structures and the homeless.[51] The transitory spaces are only transitory for travelers and pedestrians; for the people who live on the streets and in bus and train stations, these spaces are not to be traversed through, but to be lived in. In *Aberrant Motion #3*, Sisler historically contextualizes the viewer's preconceived notions of the lone woman (Ruvinsky) sitting in a bus station by talking about homeless women who were forced to move to urban centers during the Depression. She talks of the two historical categories of single women: the hobos who were considered "unredeemable" and the workingwomen who were considered "redeemable," pointing out the line drawn in the sand between acceptable and unacceptable social behavior.[52] "The predominant fear was that women moving into cities looking for work as clerks, salesgirls, mill workers were living without moral guidance and would ultimately endanger society."[53] Clearly, the line of respectability has shifted somewhat since the Depression, for many women now live alone and are not considered a possible threat to the public. Although perhaps social standards for single women have changed in the past eighty years, the same cannot be said of society's outlook on people with mental illness. As can be seen by the reactions of the passersby in Sisler's videos, when faced with the deviant behavior of the spinning woman, people mostly ignore it or laugh at it. Sisler conflates the fears of

[51] David Rokeby's website; accessed March 12, 2012, www.davidrokeby.com.
[52] Sisler, *Aberrant Motion #3*.
[53] Ibid.

and for single women with social prejudices against the mentally ill through the image of her isolated female subject. During the modern age, as Michel Foucault suggests in *Madness and Civilization*, institutions were created to hide aberrations (whether single women, women with mental illness or the poor). In the public's reaction to unfamiliar actions, these historical boundaries still continue through to today. When faced with deviant behaviors, people are unsure of how to act. Sisler exposes the deeply-rooted social fear of the possible violent actions of the mentally ill. In this instance, rather than creating a bridge across opposites, Sisler reinforces the physical boundaries between the aberrant woman and the public by reiterating the emotional differences between the two.

When Sisler sets up the physical opposition between the public and the aberrant woman, she then utilizes emotions and thoughts that layer over the physical binaries. Sisler juxtaposes the public's prejudices against the deviant, homeless woman with the fears and thoughts of this woman to create a space within which we can rethink these negative, social taboos. Just as the actions and dress of both the spinning and staggering woman mark them as physically different (reflecting a psychological and emotional difference) Sisler refers to historically marginalized women from the Great Depression of the early twentieth century. In *Aberrant Motion #3,* this story of the Depression is narrated, while Ruvinsky, as the spinning woman, sits in a bus station holding her box of balls, talking to herself and then crouches underneath a tree as cars drive by on a busy street. These actions mark Ruvinsky as different, as marginalized; she has the markings of a homeless woman, an insane woman, an irrational woman. Yet through the narration, we hear

the efforts of this woman to normalize and to stay in control. Sisler speaks of her yearning to be a part of society in *Aberrant Motion #2*: she goes out every day (with her stability structure surrounding her) searching for "someplace in the city where she might join a group of people who would meet each other each day in a building. She thought to herself, 'Yeah, I want to be a team player.'"[54] A poignant line when compared to the image of Sisler in the large boxy construction, trying to enter buildings and walking down busy streets, repeating awkward gestures. By visually showing the marks of an unstable woman transposed onto the verbalization of her rational longing to fit in, Sisler creates a space where a bridge can be made between the viewer's initial perception of a "mad" woman and the eventual understanding of the emotional desires and psychological struggles of that woman.

Sisler constructs empathetic bridges through the conflation of the deviant actions of the aberrant woman with her inner thoughts. She also utilizes the aberrant female body, her own and Ruvinsky's, as a conscious public statement questioning preconceived notions of normative dress and behavior. Sisler wears a long black coat that accentuates her large size yet also renders her movements fluid with its flapping tails and flowing lines. Her hair is shaved and she walks around oblivious to the stares from the passersby. (See Figure 5.) Ruvinsky wears a house coat, awkward white socks that come to mid-shin and white sneakers, while she walks around in public spaces clutching a box. Not only do both women act in deviant ways, their dress marks them as aberrant. Peggy Phelan refers to the politics of visibility and the arguments for and against being visibly marked as different. She questions the binary between the unmarked, invisible, marginalized

[54] Sisler, *Aberrant Motion #3*.

population who have no power and the visibly marked group who proclaim power in their difference. Referring to Lacan, Phelan claims that "visibility is a trap…it summons surveillance and the law; it provokes voyeurism, fetishism, the colonialist/imperial appetite for possession. Yet it retains a certain political appeal."[55] Phelan does not address the issue of choice in wanting to be marked or unmarked. Some people and groups have the ability to move from center to margin and back easily because they are not physically different. Here, I would like to refer to the artist Adrian Piper who is a very pale black woman. She insists on her blackness in her art practice: she could easily pass for white but her forceful insistence of blackness creates a sense of unease. Although one could argue that physical dress is a matter of choice, mental illness is not. Generally the difference between sanity and madness is hidden within the body, yet Sisler adamantly places the accoutrements of insanity in public view. As in Phelan's postulations on the political stance of being marked, Sisler's insistence on the odd costumes and structures clearly puts herself into a category of difference, a place with "a certain political appeal." This confrontation with the viewer's potential prejudices creates a pause, a place for reflection and connection.

The insertion of Sisler's and Ruvinsky's imperfect bodies into the video underscores the difference between the mediated version of the ideal female body and the real bodies of women. In this way, Sisler deliberately rejects an accepted set of social norms. A shot in *Aberrant Motion* #2 juxtaposes Sisler as the stability delusion spinning next to a bus stop, on which is a large Gap ad featuring a beautiful

[55] Peggy Phelan, "Broken Symmetries: Memory, Sight, Love," in *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Amelia Jones (New York: Routledge, 2010), 122.

young woman. (See Figure 6.) The spinning woman is trapped in her disguise as a stability delusion, turning in circles as the passersby try to ignore her. The face of the model is frozen and trapped in the frame of the bus ad powerless, just as Sisler is trapped in her structure, but the model is an object to be looked at and admired. The model is the representation of beauty and perfection and desire, whereas Sisler represents the deviant and abnormal and the undesirable. Amelia Jones writes in *Body Art/Performing the Subject* about the artist Laura Aguilar who uses her body and recognizable social signs to create an identity that cannot be easily categorized. Aguilar's acknowledgement of the empowerment and deviance of her own, large body parallels Sisler's aberrant body.

> Aguilar's work simultaneously expresses anxiety about the incoherence of the self…but also exuberantly plays out the dissolution of the notion of the 'individual' as codifiable in terms of a singular and universalizable identity.[56]

Sisler similarly rejects any attempts at classification by creating a visual subject who could be viewed as a social outcast. On to this character, she layers a narrative that underscores the subject's universal human desire to be accepted. This juxtaposition produces a description of a total human being, not just one aspect of a person. Jones quotes Allucquére Rosanne Stone: "We develop elaborate location technologies to fix the body's meaning within a precise system of cultural beliefs and expectations; but the most interesting bodies escape this attempt to locate them within a predefined meaning structure."[57] Sisler's combination of visual and verbal locations defies a singular definition; she demonstrates an identity that cannot be essentialized as mentally ill or homeless, but expresses a conglomeration of qualities

[56] Amelia Jones, *Body Art/Performing the Subject*, 221.
[57] Ibid, 226.

that make up a person. This conglomeration humanizes stereotypes, for we can recognize that we are all mixtures of qualities and cannot be fully defined in a word or a phrase.

The role of the body plus the narration of the story take part in the larger, affective role of making positive connections – not just uncovering the unseen, but expressing rawness, explaining trauma, exposing the inner workings of the spinning woman's mind. As was made clear at the beginning of this essay, we must remind ourselves that art works are not the artist; and in this case, the videos are not documentary films. Sisler is apparent in these works yet the details are not purely autobiographical. To what extent does what we know about an artist influence the meaning making of an artwork? Similar to modes of analyzing art through trauma theory, Sisler's works, as art made by a woman who manifests psycho-emotional disorders, can be considered modes of communication or attempts to create transformative (for the artist and the viewer) experiences.

Jill Bennett succinctly describes the potential role for contemporary art in trauma studies by calling for a supportive system that would incorporate art into experience. To this end, she curated an exhibition based on experiences of trauma. As she states in *Empathic Vision*, her work:

> moves away from the traps of "crude empathy" to describe art that, by virtue of its specific affective capacities, is able to exploit forms of embodied perception in order to promote forms of critical inquiry. This conjunction of affect and critical awareness may be understood to constitute the basis of an empathy grounded not in affinity (*feeling for* another insofar as we can imagine *being* that other) but on a *feeling for* another that entails an encounter with something irreducible and different, often inaccessible.[58]

[58] Bennett, *Empathic Vision,* 10.

She looks at contemporary art that does not simply replay, copy or explain trauma but that transmits the traumatic experience at the level of affect. Like the practices addressed by Bennett, Sisler's video series produces an encounter with difference that sparks critical thought. She attempts to both create affinity through her narrative and at the same time, she visually exhibits her own experiences with psycho-emotional disorders. She uses binaries to construct her transmissions and then demands interaction through these transmissions. By either simply revealing the existence of certain binaries in our society or by transposing the opposites to produce a connection, Sisler forces a transmission of affect. This transmission is thrust upon the viewer of the video who then responds physically and cognitively. Her approach of personalizing the deviant woman compels an empathetic reaction in the viewer. Once the viewer receives this personal information, the socially unacceptable subject (the mentally ill or homeless, for instance) becomes humanized, changing the opinions of the receiver of that information. The viewer is affected by this transmission of experience. Cathy Sisler works within this transmission to generate connections between herself and the viewer.

III. Lindsay Seers

The story of Lindsay Seers's life as told through her art making practice is punctuated, and practically anchored, by traumatic experiences and attempts to make sense of her losses and traumas. Seers utilizes memory, both real and fabricated, to construct the world contained within her works. Art historian Barbara Maria Stafford writes about the complexity of the human memory in terms of cognitive science and art in *Echo Objects: The Cognitive Work of Images*:

> If higher-order consciousness can be defined as the ability to be conscious of

> being a conscious entity, it also enables us to re-create past events by re-collecting and re-bundling them. To remember a prior occasion long since dissolved entails becoming conscious of some isolated moment or concatenated thing, precipitated out from a crowd of other memories.[59]

In other words, cognitive scientists recognize that memory making is a dynamic process that evolves from a process of sifting and culling through many sensory inputs and then filtered through time. Memory is not a stable structure that is obvious from its moment of inception through to the present. Lindsay Seers uses her art to question this idea of the veracity and immutability of memory. Truth is irrelevant. Facts are irrelevant. The relevance in the work of Seers lies in the affective connections and transmissions she creates. As Bennett stresses the importance of the subjective understanding of trauma in interpreting past experiences, Stafford shows the malleability of memory in constructing a past. By combining various mediums, possible autobiographical and fantastic facts, and then presenting them in a quasi-documentary style, Seers implicates the viewer in the meaning making of her memories. The events of the past can only be defined once we have lived through the moment and then we can contain that memory or event within a certain context. As art historian and cultural theorist Griselda Pollock stated while concluding a talk about the art making practices of Chantal Ackerman and Bracha L. Ettinger: "The past only arrives once the future has been built to contain it."[60] Seers contextualizes her past traumas, searches and journeys through her art making and ultimately our interaction with the work. I will examine various

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[59] Barbara Maria Stafford, *Echo Objects: The Cognitive Work of Images* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 12.

[60] Griselda Pollock, *Aesthetic Wit(h)nessing in Post Traumatic Cultures: From Pathos Formula to Transport of Trauma in Installations by Chantal Ackerman and Bracha L. Ettinger*, public presentation, OCAD University, Toronto, January 31, 2012.

themes that recur in her videos, focusing mainly on *Extramission 6 (Black Maria)*: her use of photography in its many manifestations, the archive, technology, and the inclusion of her body. [61] On multiple levels, Seers generates connections and invokes reactions.

If one were to piece together a single storyline of Lindsay Seers's life as told through her art, it would start with a father in the Navy who was posted to Mauritius, Lindsay's birthplace. According to an account of Seers's life by Anthony Penwill, she had an eidetic memory as a young child and did not speak for the first eight years of her life.[62] Her eidetic memory was not limited to vision, but was a complete sensory recall of situations. She did not feel the need to speak, for all of her senses were completely integrated with the world around her. When she first saw a photograph of herself, she was shocked into saying the words "Is that me?" After this rupture, her language skills increased while her eidetic memory faded. Seers spent much of her adolescence obsessively photographing the world in an attempt to recapture her lost sense of perfect recall. This obsession continued into adulthood when she turned her body into a camera by placing photosensitive paper in her mouth and using her lips as the shutter. When Seers discovered another artist who was also using her mouth as a camera, Seers was so traumatized because

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[61] This piece was shown in Toronto at TPW Gallery as part of the Images Festival in the spring of 2011.

[62] As defined in the book *Human Camera*, a quasi fictional account of the trajectory of Seers's life, Anthony Penwill defines the scope of Seers's recall: "We learn that she is 'gifted' with truly phenomenal eidetic recall, a perfection of memory so detailed and complete that her sense of past and present, of a difference between a world *out there* and the inner representation of that world, has never emerged." (Lindsay Seers, *Human Camera*, 2007, accessed February 15, 2012, http://www.lindsayseers.info/sites/seers-dev.dev.freewayprojects.com/files/publications/human_camera.pdf.

of her revelation that she was not the only person making photographs in this manner, that she immediately ceased using this process. She dabbled in ventriloquism and then turned herself into a projector by placing an apparatus on her head that could project images out, as if directly from her brain. (See Figures 7-12, pages 44-46.) Another seminal traumatic episode in Seers's life was when her stepsister, Christine Parkes, was in a moped accident in Rome that left her partially brain damaged: both her long and short-term memories were affected. Two years after this accident Christine mysteriously disappeared. Seers attempted to solve the mystery of Christine's disappearance by retracing her stepsister's movements in the last few years of her life. Fantasy or reality? Or perhaps a mélange of both.

Reality and fantasy are muddled together in Seers's art and the telling of her personal history. The questions she poses and then leaves open to interpretation intentionally implicate the viewer, forming a sense of plasticity in her story. Henri Bergson's idea that memory is not a stable object but one that is continually being formed has always fascinated Seers.[63] She references this concept by playing with her own sense of memory through her work and then implicates the viewer in the meaning making process. The first three videos Seers made, *The World of Jules Eisenbud (Remission)*, 2005, *Intermission*, 2005 and *Extramission 6 (Black Maria)*, 2009, illustrate how she carefully constructs a single storyline: one that includes intrigue, autobiography and documentation. Each work builds on the one before so that the story culminates in *Extramission 6* with possible explanations of how and

[63] Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, trans. Nancy Margaret Paul and W. Scott Palmer (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1911).

why Seers became a camera and then a projector. *The World of Jules Eisenbud (Remission)* chronicles Seers's relationship with a psychologist in Denver, Colorado,

Figure 7. Lindsay Seers, Two headed ventriloquist dummy with cameras in his mouths, 2006, courtesy of the artist.

Figure 8. Lindsay Seers shows the act of mouth photographing for mouth photos, 2009, courtesy of the artist.

Figure 9. Lindsay Seers, Installation view of *Extramission 6 (Black Maria)* at Tate Modern, London, 2009, courtesy of the artist.

Figure 10. Lindsay Seers, photograph with mouth photograph counterpart, 2009, courtesy of the artist.

Figure 11. Lindsay Seers, Interior view of *Extramission 6 (Black Maria)* with still of Seers as projector, 2009, courtesy of the artist.

Figure 12. Lindsay Seers, Interior View of *Extramission 6 (Black Maria)* with still of Seers as projector, 2009, courtesy of the artist.

who had an intense interest in the possibility of physically photographing thoughts. Eisenbud had spent years studying a subject, Ted Serios, who could reportedly channel his mental images into a Polaroid camera that would then immediately print the image. Years after Serios disappeared, Eisenbud stumbled across Lindsay Seers's mouth photographs and was struck by the similarities between Serios' Polaroids and Seers's photos. As Lindsay Seers was travelling around Europe photographing with her mouth, a man apparently unbeknownst to Seers, Frank Weston, was photographing her. Some of his photographs, which are shown in many of Seers's videos, are uncomfortably intimate. Stalker or biographer? Interested or obsessed? Who was Weston? What was his relationship to Seers? How did he have access to her – with or without her consent? These questions are constantly being asked, boundaries being blurred. After she gives up mouth photography, Seers turns to ventriloquism, an art that her Aunt Barbara, whom she met while researching family history, teaches her. *Intermission* is a video about her exploration of ventriloquism – although Seers never "performs" with her dummies in any of the videos. Her dolls become stand-ins for her body camera – the dummies have cameras in their mouths – as well as for friends and family; her apartment is filled with the dolls, not people. (See Figure 7.) Finally, in *Extramission 6 (Black Maria)*, Seers circles back to her childhood and the possible reasons for her art making practice as a camera and a projector. It is impossible to analyze Seers's work without attempting to construct at least a semblance of a storyline, for the artist has created pieces that are on the surface stable, yet are uncomfortably unstable when the surface is scratched. Seers creates the first level of connection

between her art and the viewer based on this instability, perhaps a reflection of the artist's own core unsteadiness.

The documentary-like style of Seers's art leads the viewer to blindly assume that she is portraying truth and reality. She blurs the line between reality and illusion, which, when the irregular truth is perceived by the viewer, destabilizes the viewer emotionally and even physically. This blurring of boundaries constructs a space, where a suspension of disbelief allows for generative connections to be formed. Other artists, particularly women, have explored this border between fantasy and reality as a possibility for transformation. Using examples such as Adrian Piper, Martha Wilson, and Nancy Kitchel, who all created hybrids of reality and fantasy, Lucy Lippard writes about the way they pushed the limits of their identities through their conceptual art making during the 1970s. Lippard points out the role of transforming identities by women conceptual artists; at the same time she reinforces a particular definition of the relationship between psychology and art. "Art is, after all, a fantasy, for all its imagined 'new realisms,' and the artist is a fantasy figure made up by herself/himself in collaboration with society and legend."[64] Although referring to the groundbreaking work of a group of women from the 1970s, these words are relevant to the work of many contemporary artists. Lindsay Seers follows these artists in her exploration of boundaries as spaces that create generative connections through her use of photography, interviews, and storytelling. History and the present, fantasy and reality all merge in Seers's works to create a compelling story of loss, trauma and mental illness that entices the

[64] Lucy Lippard, "Making Up: Role-Playing and Transformation in Women's Art," *Ms.*, no. 4 (October 1975).

viewer to interact with the works. The example of Joseph Beuys and his fictitious biographical story of wartime adventures also comes to mind. He describes his rescue by a group of Tatars in Crimea after a plane crash. His pilot did not survive, but because Beuys had not been wearing his seat belt, he was thrown from the plane. The Tatars are said to have wrapped him in animal fat and felt to cure his wounds before returning him to the Germans. In a conversation with Benjamin Buchloh and Annette Michelson on the occasion of the first Beuys show at a major American museum (the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum) in 1980, Rosalind Krauss dismisses Beuys' story as fictional.

> Do you mind a slight digression, since we're on the subject of Beuys's mythology, his falsified background? A digression to the plane crash? I love the plane crash. No one can look at those photographs of the crash in the Crimea without bursting into laughter, because it is, of course, highly unlikely that Beuys or anyone else, the Tartars included, would have had a camera.[65]

Whether the origins of this account are true or not, the realism of Beuys' work (which sometimes includes fat and felt) compels the viewer. Likewise, the works by Cathy Sisler and Lindsay Seers do not necessarily rely on real events; these artists create affective strategies by weaving together truth and artifice. I will now look at Seers's use of the photograph, the archive and the body to show how she creates more connections and concurrently, more instability.

The first traumatic experience to which Lindsay Seers refers occurs when she sees a photograph of herself and she is startled into speaking her first words. Seers references Jacques Lacan's theory of the mirror phase when a baby first

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[65] Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, Rosalind Krauss and Annette Michelson, "Joseph Beuys at the Guggenheim," *October* 12 (Spring 1980): 8, accessed March 17, 2012, http://www.jstor.org/stable/778572.

realizes his/her relationship to the world, Seers's baby mirror is a photograph of herself. Until that moment, partly due to her eidetic memory, Seers's sense of self was wholly integrated with the outside. At this point of rupture, she realizes the physical boundaries of her body and her senses. She continues to build on this theme of self-boundaries as reflected in mirrors and in photographs. Her mouth camera is a direct attempt to embody vision, to capture the Lacanian Real that she lost when she first saw a photograph of herself. While discussing the eye and the gaze Lacan defines these visual slippages between self and object, as the gaze:

> In our relation to things, in so far as this relation is constituted by the way of vision, and ordered in the figures of representation, something slips, passes, is transmitted, from stage to stage, and is always to some degree eluded in it – that is what we call the gaze.[66]

Seers attempts to portray the elusive, the inexplicable, by circling around the truth and showing possible interpretations of the truth. As Jill Bennett writes of art that *refers* to trauma, not a direct recreation of trauma, and Christine Ross writes of the aesthetics of disengagement, not directly of depression in art, Seers circumscribes her own traumatic experiences through documentation. She includes her mouth photographs, Weston's photographs of herself and the original childhood photograph in *Extramission 6.* In psychoanalytic terms, her myriad experiences of trauma are her missed encounters with the Real. Seers exploits the sense of truth portrayed through photography to lure the viewer into her story; once hooked into the narrative, the viewer cannot disengage. Her transmission of multiple possible truths created through the use of photography and photodocumentation links

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[66] Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XI*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W.W.Norton & Company, Inc., 1978), 73.

trauma to her story, links the various sections of her narrative and also links the viewer to the work.

Not only does Lindsay Seers play with the Lacanian sense of self that constantly attempts to be the object she sees in her photograph (Lacan's mirror) but she also adeptly engages with Roland Barthes's writings on photography through the inclusion of Frank Weston's biographical photographs in *Extramission 6*. As part of her process of being a camera, Seers needs complete darkness to transfer the photographic paper into and out of her mouth. She uses a large black bag, which she puts over her head such that only part of her legs can be seen. One of Weston's shots is of Seers sitting on a bench, covered in the black bag, barefoot with only her calves and feet showing. (See Figure 8.) Another photograph is taken through the partially open doorway on a ship showing Seers with her back to the door, once again ensconced in the black bag – an extremely vulnerable position. Similar to what Barthes describes as the various senses of self that he encounters while being photographed, Seers portrays multiple perceptions of her actions. While laying the groundwork for his writings on the power of photographs Barthes states:

> The portrait-photograph is a closed field of forces. Four image-repertoires intersect here, oppose and distort each other. In front of the lens, I am at the same time: the one I think I am, the one I want others to think I am, the one the photographer thinks I am, and the one he makes use of to exhibit his art. In other words, a strange action: I do not stop imitating myself, and because of this, each time I am (or let myself be) photographed, I invariably suffer from a sensation of inauthenticity, sometimes of imposture (comparable to certain nightmares).[67]

Seers references each of these four aspects of her self in her work and then adds more interpretations, more "impostures." Assuming that she was aware of being

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[67] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography,* trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 13.

photographed by Weston, she allows him to witness her process of being a camera. In front of his camera lens, she is the one she thinks she is and also the one she wants others to think she is. In Seers's work, this idea of enactment is paramount, the viewer needs to be reminded that her work is a construction, not a documentary. To proceed with the analogy to Barthes' four image-repertoires, she then is also the one that the photographer (Weston) thinks she is, as well as the one he makes use of to exhibit his art. Of course in *Extramission 6*, Weston is not the one exhibiting his own photographs; it is Seers who utilizes them. Seers combines Barthes's four pronged definition at the same time that she expands it. She collapses the definition by putting into question the role of the photographer and his agency, thereby eliminating half of the definition. Yet we cannot completely dismiss the role of Frank Weston, for clearly someone took the photographs of Seers. Perhaps in this regard, Seers is expanding Barthes's definition by adding ambiguity to the terms. She scrambles the power believed to be inherent in the subject and in the photographer, which leads to a destabilization of the viewer. What is occurring when Seers places these photographs of herself in a video installation about her life as a camera? The lens, this time a video camera lens, is back on Seers who, as Barthes says, cannot help but pose for the camera.[68] Seers has created another definition by utilizing the photograph in a video. She controls the narrative and the perception of the viewer in a subtle way that is guided, yet not obvious. The connections she is trying to draw between power, time and, most importantly, memory, all implicate the viewer in an atmosphere of instability.

[68] Ibid, 10.

Extramission 6 (Black Maria) includes not only photographs but also interviews with people close to Lindsay Seers, all speculating on her erratic development. Because she composes the audiovisuals as testimonials, albeit conversational testimonials, she leads the viewer into believing that truth lies in the words. The three witnesses are a woman, Alicia Seers (purportedly Lindsay Seers's mother), a psychoanalyst and an unidentified male voice, possibly Seers's art dealer. Each narrator fills in parts of Lindsay Seers's life story. Alicia Seers recounts Lindsay's early years, how worried she and her husband had been about the fact Lindsay did not speak, how overjoyed they were when she did begin to speak. Alicia Seers also tells of the trip back to Mauritius she and Lindsay took to try to retrace the past in the hopes of uncovering the traumatic experience that may have caused Lindsay's eidetic memory. Although fairly unemotional, Alicia Seers is critical of Lindsay's life as a camera. She would have preferred that Lindsay paint pretty pictures than climb in and out of black bags and tents to load film and develop photographs. The psychoanalyst talks of the possible causes for Lindsay Seers's eidetic memory, of the possibility of a traumatic experience and of Seers's itinerant life spent constantly searching for something.[69] The male narrator takes over the storytelling in Seers's adult life. He speaks of how she showed up in Rome needing a place to stay and in seeming distress. His regret was that he had lost a small model of the Black Maria that Lindsay had made while staying with him. Notably, all that he had left from her visit was a photograph of this small-scale model. Alicia Seers and the man both talk of Lindsay Seers's oddness, the fact that she was different; all

[69] Perhaps this refers back to the concept of Lacanian lack and the gaze that Seers is constantly attempting to capture.

three narrators speak of her unhappiness. The testimonies are similar to ones given on television talk or news shows. There seems to exist a semblance of sincerity, or at the very least a compelling story, yet inherent in this story is a core of doubt. Perhaps this is Seers's comment on the mediation of personal histories, personal archives. In conjunction with the photographs and video footage of the journeys Seers has embarked upon, the testimonies archive Seers's life as viewed from people who are close to her. Allegedly autobiographical, Seers's voice is not heard directly yet she is able to carefully orchestrate all aspects of the video to reflect her life, to create her own archival art about herself.

Hal Foster writes of contemporary artists, such as Thomas Hirschhorn, Tacita Dean, and Sam Durant who create archival art, in his article "An Archival Impulse." He emphasizes the ability of these artists' works to create new experiences of historical facts, not necessarily to create new relationships. Foster stresses that a fragmentary quality of the works is inherent in archival art, which creates connections between past and present, forming a certain order out of chaos. "Perhaps all archives develop in this way, through mutations of connection and disconnection, a process that this art also serves to disclose."[70] For Foster, as for Seers, archival art is about building connections while concurrently exposing the imperfect links, the disjunctures. Ostensibly, Seers is attempting to uncover unhappy or traumatic childhood memories that may have caused her eidetic memory and eventually its loss, yet no such occurrence has been discovered. The three narrators profess concern for Seers, yet are unable to help her unearth

[70] Hal Foster, "An Archival Impulse," *October* 110 (Fall 2004): 6, accessed November 16, 2011, http://www.mitpressjournals.org/doi/pdf/10.1162/0162287042379847.

particular moments of trauma or loss, other than the ones of which she already knows. For Seers, the *process* of documenting and creating an archive generates new relationships through her art.

Housed in a model of Thomas Edison's Black Maria, the studio built to process film for the inventor's Kinetoscope, *Extramission 6 (Black Maria)* references not only a personal archive, but a socio-cultural one as well. (See Figure 9.) The structure was built on a turntable with a retractable roof so that the maximum amount of sunlight could be captured for the filming process. It was demolished in the early part of the last century; only a reproduction exists and, of course, an archive of photographs and written descriptions. Seers's model does not turn and does not have a retractable roof (or at least not one that was open at the time of the showing of *Extramission* 6 in Toronto). Seers, according to the male voice in the video, was obsessed with recreating the Black Maria in drawings, small scale models and eventually the large scale installation that is an inherent part of *Extramission 6*. The first level of socio-historical reference is in the name "Black Maria," which refers to the cramped space inside the structure that was similar to the interior of a police wagon, commonly known as a black maria. Imprisonment within the structure suggests the emotional/psychological turmoil from which Seers is trying to escape. Confining the viewer to the restricted space within her installation sets up a physical discomfort and unease that is reflected in the video. Seers has complete control of the viewing environment, just as the police had control of their inmates, and Edison had control of the production and display of the films in the original Black Maria.

In *Extramission 6,* Seers links historical themes and social interactions with

current uses and relationships of technologies. She refuses the current interactive technologies in her works and houses her installation in a historical structure reflecting the fraught relationship between people and technology and art. As early as the end of the nineteenth century when electricity was still new, electrical experts as well as laypeople conjectured about the myriad possibilities, both positive and negative, of new technologies. Carolyn Marvin writes of the feelings of fear and wonder in her book, *When Old Technologies Were New: Thinking about Electric Communication in the Late Nineteenth Century*, examining the social ramifications of two mass media technologies: electricity and the telephone.[71] Marvin argues that the overwhelming impact of these new technologies was to further stratify social groups because of the unknown possibilities of the technology. Marvin does not view the technology as stand-alone objects, but as part of a culture.

> The history of media is never more or less than the history of their uses, which always lead us away from them to the social practices and conflicts they illuminate…New media embody the possibility that accustomed orders are in jeopardy, since communication is a peculiar kind of interaction that actively seeks variety.[72]

Edison destroyed the Black Maria in 1903, because he had built a better film studio with a glass roof (eliminating the need for a turntable and a retractable roof). This cycle of constant change and destruction has been amplified in contemporary technologies – planned obsolescence forces consumers to buy new computers every couple of years and cell phones even more frequently. In this culture of

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[71] Carolyn Marvin, *When Old Technologies Were New: Thinking about Electric Communication in the Late Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988). Marvin argues that although the telephone is not technically a "mass media" technology, the early use of the telephone radically changed the social perception of private and public spheres.
[72] Ibid, 8.

technological "advances" Lindsay Seers determinedly creates an installation of a century old film studio. She refers to both Edison's advances that subvert his own earlier technologies and is also harking back to a time of innocence. Seers relates contemporary technological uses to technological possibilities of a hundred years ago, conflating the present with the past. According to Marvin,

> new media took social risks by permitting outsiders to cross boundaries of race, gender, and class without penalty. They provided new ways to silence underclasses and to challenge authority by altering customary orders of secrecy and publicity, and customary proprieties of address and interaction.[73]

Marvin shows the social effects of these new technologies, a breaking down of social boundaries. Technology is a social equalizer, film viewing is an inexpensive way of being entertained, even today. Seers uses this particular installation, *Extramission 6 (Black Maria)*, as another chance to reach out to an audience, asking for an equalization not just of classes but also of the marginalized, asking for understanding for those with emotional/psychological issues from the general public. Just as electricity was thought to possess therapeutic powers, Seers conjures a type of relational therapy through the use of older technologies. Once again, she has created historical and social connections through both the physical qualities of her work, as well as the affective qualities.

One of the most obvious connections Seers makes is the link between her body and a machine: a camera and a projector. By using her mouth as a camera, Seers constructs a camera obscura within her body. The camera obscura has a pinhole at one end of a box that lets light in. The light is projected onto the back of the box and an image of the total scene in front of the pinhole can be seen, only

[73] Ibid, 107.

upside down. (See Figure 10.) The camera obscura eventually led to the invention of photography. Not only does this procedure document her surroundings, Seers has a physical connection to the image that is entrenched in her mouth, close to her brain. Later, she fashions a projector onto a headpiece so that she could project images as if directly from her brain. (See Figure 11.) She is mimicking the lost process of sensory input and output she had originally felt. Her use of the body as a mechanism directly refers to the idea of the cyborg in Donna Haraway's "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century" wherein Haraway calls for a utopian future by using the metaphor of a cyborg (a cybernetic organism), a melding between technology and the female body.[74] Sisler inserts her body into structures or she manifests inanimate objects through paint and words, while Seers houses mechanisms in her body. Although Seers clearly resists using twenty-first century technologies to contain her video, she does create a physical cyborg by making her body into still and moving cameras. By conflating her animate body with inanimate technologies and attempting to ascertain a place for herself through this process, she references a larger network of correlations and relationships between the living and the object.

The use of technology as a way to push limits on self representation was referred to by Amelia Jones in *Self/Image: Technology, Representation and the Contemporary Subject*. Currently, artists are experimenting with the body, specifically as a recording device, thereby producing political statements. Two of these artists are Steve Mann and Wafaa Bilal. Steve Mann takes pictures with a

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[74] Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

mechanism in his glasses. Then, with an algorithm he developed, he stitches together a composite image, a "painting with looks."[75] In a project titled *Sousveillance*, 2003, Mann explores the concept of modern day surveillance and possible actions that would subvert this constant surveillance (hence the name *Sousveillance*).[76] Wafaa Bilal in his project entitled *3rdi*, 2011, implanted a camera onto the back of his head. Every minute a picture would be taken and uploaded to a website along with Bilal's global positioning system location. By creating a separate yet parallel narrative of his life (as seen from the back of his head rather than through his eyes), Bilal wanted to communicate a different story than the normally accepted version of an Iranian artist. Both Mann and Bilal are contemporary cyborgs who utilize technology to construct political dialogues. Their political positioning builds upon Haraway's 1980s idea of a cyborg that makes political claims from the female body. She refers to the breakdown of certain boundaries in the late twentieth century that allowed her to make her analyses. The two most pertinent definitions are those between "animal-human (organism) and machine" and "the boundary between physical and non-physical [which have become] very imprecise."[77] Seers takes advantage of these broken boundaries and disintegrates them even further by literally embodying the technology. In a sense, Seers flips Haraway's concept of a technology that enhances the human body (such as the cameras of Mann and Bilal) to one of the human body enhancing technology. Seers's

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[75] These images can be seen on the website, accessed February 15, 2012, www.wearcam.org/nn.mpg.
[76] Steve Mann, Jason Nolan and Barry Wellman, "Sousveillance: Inventing and Using Wearable Computing Devices for Data Collection in Surveillance Environments," *Surveillance & Society* 1 (3): 331-355.
[77] Ibid, 310-311.

body takes over the mechanical functioning of the technology rather than the technology taking over "imperfect" human mechanisms. Seers does not implant a video camera on her head to become a camera, rather her lips and hands become the shutter of a camera. Whereas Haraway calls for political action through her breaking down of boundaries: "So my cyborg myth is about transgressed boundaries, potent fusions, and dangerous possibilities which progressive people might explore as one part of needed political work," Seers calls for an understanding of her process.[78] Her personal appeal for understanding becomes a larger political statement when it is mediated and publicized, when her action as a camera is documented and then placed in a video. Haraway concludes in her article that "taking responsibility for the social relations of science and technology means…embracing the skillful task of reconstructing the boundaries of daily life, in partial connection with others, in communication with all of our parts."[79] Seers's action as a camera or projector is a personal process, but when it is put into the public sphere through her art, then her actions can be construed as political, a request for relations and connections in a networked world that she had felt so vividly in the first few years of her life.

For Seers who plays with perception and time, the roles of technology and the viewer are intertwined in her exploration of her psychological and physical history. Seers becomes the camera obscura, an early optical device that "enhances" human perception. Jonathan Crary in *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*, traces a history based on the observer, not on the development of optical devices, for he argues that vision cannot be separated

[78] Ibid, 312.
[79] Ibid, 339.

from the observer.[80] He stresses the importance of the role of the camera obscura in the development of the modern observer, for this mechanism clearly defined the observer as separate from the exterior world.

> What is crucial about the camera obscura is its relation of the observer to the undemarcated, undifferentiated expanse of the world outside, and how its apparatus makes an orderly cut or delimitation of that field allowing it to be viewed, without sacrificing the vitality of its being. But the movement and temporality so evident in the camera obscura were always prior to the act of representation; movement and time could be seen and experienced, but never represented.[81]

Seers lost her ability to be completely immersed and connected to her surroundings when her eidetic memory faded. She had not been able to differentiate between the interior of herself and the exterior of her environment. The camera obscura organizes a part of that expansive world "without sacrificing the vitality of its being" according to Crary. So when Seers enacts a camera obscura in her attempt to reconnect with her lost eidetic memory, she records a small cross-section of the world. (See Figures 7 and 10.) As she repeats this action compulsively, she is able to document and connect, to represent small areas of her present world. Seers can intellectually comprehend her physical separation from the space around her, but emotionally she is struggling with the lack of total sensory integration with her surroundings that she had originally felt. She had experienced movement and time in a completely different manner and through her art is trying to represent it, as Crary claims, because the camera obscura that can capture the essence of being. The distinction between Crary's and Seers's reading of the camera obscura, lies in the fact that Crary is referring to a mechanism and its relationship to the human

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[80] Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999).
[81] Ibid, 34.

observer (he is not saying that the human observer can only experience movement and time through technology, quite the contrary), whereas Seers has complicated the relationship between the two by embodying the camera obscura in order to better capture the missing link of her own sensory memory. She is not utilizing a technology to better represent what she experiences, rather she is embodying the technology to better experience the world around her.

The Interrogative Design department at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology has a line of inquiry that focuses on enhancing communication between people. The stated goal of the whole group is "to combine art and technology into design while infusing it with emerging cultural issues that play critical roles in our society yet are given the least design attention."[82] The artist, Krzysztof Wodiczko, best known for his politically charged projections onto buildings and monuments, experimented with wearable technologies that helped people communicate who normally have troubles integrating into society. One such project is entitled *Dis-Armor* where Wodiczko and his team at MIT designed an apparatus, worn as a backpack with a monitor that displayed the wearer's eyes through an audiovisual feed on the headgear. The wearer could literally turn his/her back and still be able to talk to another person. This project was originally intended for a group of Japanese high school dropouts, named "refusers."[83] Alienated high school students are able to interact with other students and the public at large with the use of the *Dis-Armor*. In a video documenting wearers a teenage girl approaches a table of

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[82] Interrogative Design Group's website, accessed April 29, 2012, http://www.interrogative.org/about/.

[83] Krzysztof Wodiczko spoke of this project in a talk at Prefix Gallery in Toronto, January 19, 2012.

businessmen and turns her back to them. When they begin to ask her questions and to interact with her, she tells them the story of her broken home life through the video monitor on her back. This wearable technology allows for a transaction to occur between two parties who would normally not converse, let alone share private personal stories. The girl also has the opportunity to connect to a painful past experience and reinvent the effect of it by telling her story to strangers who then are forced to recognize her pain. Seers utilizes prosthetic technology in a similar way; by including her mouth photographs and images of herself as a camera and projector within her video works. (See Figure 12.) She attempts to link, not only to her past lost memories and events, but also to her present environment through the physical documentation of her surroundings and of her own self.

The archive that Lindsay Seers puts together is cumulative. She layers facts within a work (through photographs, video and spoken testimonies) and then layers that piece within the next work (*Remission, Intermission* and then *Extramission*). While her videos are anchored by traumatic experiences, Seers circles around the question of mental health. She portrays herself as a social outsider, someone who has problems with relationships (except with inanimate dummies) and someone who is searching for answers to her unhappiness and emotional instability. Seers elides her personal pain with a public viewing of that pain in an attempt to have the viewer accept and connect to her. She utilizes archiving techniques that are familiar to the twenty-first century viewer, layering and collaging. The compelling and difficult aspect of Seers's archive is the juncture between her private struggles and the public exposure of these struggles, namely the affect of discomfort. The

intersection of the private with the public eye in her work allows for the possibility of politically and emotionally productive spaces outside of psychoanalysis, analogous to the spaces of which Ann Cvetkovich, a professor of English and Women's and Gender Studies at the University of Texas at Austin writes in her book, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures*. Cvetkovich focuses on archived lesbian culture and the way public cultures can be redefined through a new reading of these archives of trauma.

> My claim that trauma raises questions about what counts as an archive is…connected to a further claim that trauma also raises questions about what counts as a public culture. My goal is to suggest how affect, including the affects associated with trauma, serves as the foundation for the formation of public cultures. This argument entails a reconsideration of conventional distinctions between political and emotional life as well as between political and therapeutic cultures.[84]

As Cvetkovich states, the affect of Seers's work can be "the foundation for the formation of public cultures," public cultures as accepted forms of expression. The viewer struggles along with Seers as she attempts to regain lost memories and lost sensory connections to the world around her. The empathy felt by the viewer goes beyond the odd happenings and actions of Seers to a deeper level of connection through the partial understanding of her motivations. Cvetkovich states that "the particular ways in which new documentaries create affective archives are instructive for the ongoing project of creating testimonials, memorial spaces, and rituals that can acknowledge traumatic pasts as a way of constructing new visions for the future."[85] In the space of contemporary art making, Seers is able to forge positive links between her personal hardships and public perception of her odd

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[84] Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 10.
[85] Ibid, 14.

behavior. Through the process of layering her archival materials, she initiates discourse about her mental/emotional instability, as well as creating temporal links between the past and the present.

IV. Conclusion

The creation and viewing of art needs to always be understood through the context of the individual: the artist's history, emotions, intentions and the same attributes for the viewer need also to be considered. Because much of this context is subjective and each person is different, multiple opportunities arise for interaction between the artist, the work of art and the viewer. Cognitive scientists have explored the relationship between the production of art and the brain, as well as the relationship of physically viewing a work and the brain. In her book, *Echo Objects: The Cognitive Work of Images*, the art historian Barbara Maria Stafford specifically relates brain functioning with visual image production. "Art enables us to observe the space inside our bodies. It gives a face to the secret life of consciousness."[86] Seers plays into Stafford's belief that the workings of her mind are clearly reflected in her art. The blurring of the boundary between art and the mind in cognitive science further justifies Seers's attempts to become a camera and then a projector. The images she projects are displayed in such a way that it appears they are coming directly from inside Seers's brain. She deliberately conflates the relationship between her mind, her psychological problems and the art she creates. The observer who is, as Crary states, not a passive acceptor of information, but an "active

[86] Stafford, *Echo Objects: The Cognitive Work of Images,* 105.

producer of optical experience" then digests these facts and images.[87] Cognitive scientist Robert Solso, writes in his book, *Cognition and the Visual Arts*, that

> art is always viewed in context. To the layperson, context is the location of the art…and one's companions… To the cognitive scientist, however, context includes two additional features: the physical composition of the visual field and the personal history of the viewer.[88]

Barbara Maria Stafford further explicates the processing of sensory data in "Picturing Uncertainty: From Representation to Mental Representation" as the dynamic culling of information in our brain.

> From a fleeting perception of transient objects and events in the environment, the brain – relying on personal and ancestral past experience – goes on to construct a viewer-centered representation…The optic nerve was once thought of as a simple vehicle carrying raw sensory data to the brain. Now we know it shapes its information in transit. The brain, in fact, leaps out into the world through its light receptors and actively seizes photonic data.[89]

Lindsay Seers, the projector, embodies this process by showing the photonic data her brain is grabbing. At the beginning of my discussion of Lindsay Seers's work, I started with one storyline that I was able to discern from the fragments of Seers's archival-like works, but there are many other possible stories that can be told. Through the many layers of facts, fictions, images, photographs, videos, oral testimonies (Stafford's transient objects and events) I constructed my viewer-centered representation of Seers's work. Even though the archival material for Cathy Sisler's works is not nearly as comprehensive as that for Seers, I have

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[87] Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century,* 69.
[88] Robert L. Solso, *Cognition and the Visual Arts* (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1994), 101.
[89] Barbara Maria Stafford, " Picturing Uncertainty: From Representation to Mental Representation," in *Media Art Histories*, ed. Oliver Grau (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 2007), 461.

constructed my own storyline for Sisler as well. The exact details that compel me may or may not be the same as what compels the next viewer. My personal history and knowledges may not match up to that of another viewer, yet Sisler and Seers have created works that overtly and stealthily draw the viewer in, regardless of personal contexts. The complex constructions of their media works consist of a diverse set of events, stories, sounds and visuals. This diversity and complexity forces the viewer into the works, generating connections on emotional, psychological, physical, and intellectual levels.

In the art of Cathy Sisler and Lindsay Seers, a tension between the public and private is always evident. Each artist explores the physical and psychological boundaries between herself and the world around her: the people, the space and the technology. The non-normative figures of Sisler and Seers, one in her large black coat or within a wooden structure and the other inside a black bag, are visual cues for the public. These cues reinforce existing social concepts of people with mental illness. The reaction to the physical marking of their bodies is similar to the reaction towards the physically deformed. Mary Russo, a professor of literature and critical theory, advocates for an acceptance of difference. She argues against the homogenization of women under the single rubric of feminism. In so doing, she emphasizes the role of the female grotesque, of the physically marked-woman, claiming that they necessarily challenge the cultural mores of feminism and femininity. "The figure of the female transgressor as public spectacle is still powerfully resonant, and the possibilities of redeploying this representation as a

demystifying or utopian model have not been exhausted."[90] Russo's call for an acceptance of non-normative bodies reflects a parallel appeal in Sisler's and Seers's art for social and cultural connections with the public. They do not hide their physical, emotional or psychological differences. Through an exploration and exposition of their private worlds, they publicly attempt to represent the affect of their inner psychological and emotional states without denying the effects of their non-normative physical state. In a sense, this public showing becomes a political space for the exhibition of marked difference, demanding recognition in our society for women who fall outside of socially, physically and psychologically accepted norms.

Partly personal, psychological/emotional construction and partly public, social construction, Sisler and Seers fashion personae as aspects of their self representations. Similar to Judith Butler's argument that an individual – based on existing social and cultural contexts – performs gender, the personae of Sisler and Seers can be understood as socially constructed.[91] Butler contends that when feminism defines political strength by grouping together large numbers of people with similar characteristics, feminism begins to essentialize the feminine experience. Rather than addressing the complexity of an issue, feminist theory, according to Butler, reiterates the existing social structure. In order to enact real political change, Butler calls for an alteration in society's "hegemonic conditions" rather than a change only in the classifications of these personal actions.

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[90] Mary Russo, *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 61.
[91] Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (December 1988): 519-31.

> The transformation of social relations becomes a matter, then, of transforming hegemonic social conditions rather than the individual acts that are spawned by those conditions. Indeed, one runs the risk of addressing the merely indirect, if not epiphenomenal, reflection of those conditions if one remains restricted to a politics of acts.[92]

Both Butler and Russo demand an acceptance of diversity through a performance of difference. Through their art, Sisler and Seers call attention to their personal experiences, losses and pains, thereby demanding recognition. The acknowledgement of their personal state by the public validates their existence. This validation occurs in their art through the space of public expression (through their art) of their private acts and thoughts. This space can bridge the gap between private and public, at the same time, it has the possibility to engender change through the recognition of a shared humanity and a sense of empathy.

Inherent in this shared space is the understanding that the viewer also holds some responsibility for the relationship. One aspect of this space stimulates the viewer physically, intellectually and emotionally, another aspect contributes to the meaning making of the piece. While analyzing the role of the spectator through a reading of Henri Bergson, Laura U. Marks in her book, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*, writes of the participatory nature of spectatorship.[93] Marks interprets Bergson's notion of "attentive recognition" as a form of active viewership.

> Perception takes place not simply in a phenomenological present but in an engagement with individual and cultural memory. Attentive recognition is thus a participatory notion of spectatorship…This viewing process

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[92] Ibid.

[93] Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000).

> reactivates a viewer's complex of memory-images at the same time that it creates the object for perception.[94]

For Marks, viewing a film/video is not a passive acceptance of a visual stimulus. Building on Jonathan Crary's theories of viewership and early technologies, Marks posits that perception makes a connection between viewing a work and engaging the viewer's "individual and cultural memory," stimulating the viewer's intellect. In the case of Sisler, her videography physically draws in the viewer. Some of the shots are of the street as the spinning woman holds the camera. The viewer is afforded a view of the world triggering a visceral feeling of dizziness that mimics the spinning woman's perspective. She is physically spinning, as well as mentally spinning, out of control. The viewer is taken along with the spinning woman on a dizzying trip. Seers's viewer becomes engaged in a different way, through an intellectual process, almost a "who dunnit mystery," piquing interest through intriguing situations. The viewer becomes perceptually engrossed through her/his intellect. In order to truly make connections, the transmission alone of affect is not enough, there needs to be reception (physical or intellectual) to complete this bridge.[95]

Referring to affective moments in contemporary art that are instigated by traumatic incidents, Griselda Pollock developed a concept she calls "transport stations of trauma."[96] She argues for areas in contemporary art that allow for

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[94] Ibid, 147.

[95] Stressing the importance of the viewer, Amelia Jones in her article, "Art History/Art Criticism: Performing Meaning," goes as far as to say that open-ended interpretations are the role of the spectator. She posits that art is practically created through our readings of it.

[96] Griselda Pollock, "Aesthetic Wit(h)nessing in Post Traumatic Cultures: From Pathos Formula to Transport of Trauma in Installations by Chantal Ackerman and Bracha L. Ettinger."

possibilities of encounters (in the Spinozan sense) where the "quintessential aesthetic experience is the border-link with an object of creation."[97] Her work explores the ways in which the artists Chantal Ackerman and Bracha L. Ettinger "transform trauma through aesthetic encounter."[98] For Pollock, art can transmit affect from one person to another. She states that although trauma cannot be directly represented, the *affect* of it can be transmitted, similar to Jill Bennett's basis in choosing works that reprise trauma rather than reproducing the exact experience. The art to which Pollock refers has the potential to create connections between individuals who have experienced trauma and to generate links to the world around them. For Sisler and Seers, their personal transmissions call into question mental health issues, such as social definitions of health and illness, stigmatization, isolation, non-normative and compulsive, repetitive behaviors. The affect of their unstable mental situations, as portrayed in their art, can articulate spaces for others who have the possibility to respond empathetically and/or sympathetically. As in Pollock's "transport stations of trauma," art engaged with mental illness in some manner, has "potential for co-affection."[99] Persons in a similar situation may be able to create a resonant bond. For those who may not be in a similar situation, the affective transmission still forms a link within, and to, the work.

Both Cathy Sisler and Lindsay Seers use their art to create bridges. By overlaying the inner workings of a mind onto the perceived view of the outer body, Sisler anchors the odd actions of her protagonists in shared human emotions of fear,

[97] Ibid.
[98] Ibid.
[99] Ibid.

loneliness, anger, confusion, and eventually, acceptance. Lindsay Seers works from the outside in, rather than the inside out. She utilizes stories and images to document what may be going on inside of her mind. As the viewer of Sisler's video (or as the person on the street who would have seen the spinning woman without the explanation of the voiceover) the actions of the spinning woman would be incomprehensible. One would see a woman in a wooden structure spinning down the street or a woman obsessively clutching a box or a woman tossing balls in a subway station; behaviors that would be considered abnormal. Most viewers, not comprehending, would be pushed away from the work and from the spinning woman. Yet, with humour, sometimes with bitterness, always with deadpan honesty, Sisler's words deliver her thoughts, ideas and feelings. In this way, the aberrant woman entices the viewer to join her in her world, rather than rejecting her because of her appearances and movements. Cathy Sisler's narrative combines a voice explicating thoughts and feelings with the actions of the non-normative protagonist; through this intersection of the inner and the outer, Sisler establishes connections. Lindsay Seers explains her own non-normative behavior through the voices of others. While watching images of Seers climbing in and out of tents or black bags to load and develop her mouth photographs, we hear testimonies from her mother expressing concern over Seers's obsession with photography or we listen to a psychologist conjecture about the causes of Seers's eidetic memory and its loss. Like Sisler, Seers utilizes the intersection of the inner psyche with outer perceptions to hook the viewer, to forge links. After all, it is human nature to want to connect to others. The videos of Cathy Sisler and Lindsay Seers produce multiple

spaces for generative connections between persons with psycho/emotional disorders, their art and the viewer.

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