

Everything In Slow Motion

by

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Roberta McNaughton

Abstract

Everything In Slow Motion

Master of Fine Arts 2015

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Interdisciplinary Master's in Art, Media and
Design OCAD University

Photography and film have the power to communicate the haptic experience of mourning through the simple observation of objects, portraits and everyday routines. *Everything In Slow Motion* is a body of work that investigates my vantage point as caregiver to a life maturing – my son at age eleven – and to a life in retrogenesis – my mother at age eighty and in late stage Alzheimer's. I photograph and film the minutiae of the everyday in an attempt to convey the simple but profound emotions of the life of three generations living in tandem.

How does one communicate endurance, and how does one convey a narrative of touch visually? In the video and photographic installation of my thesis there are a multiplicity of narratives within the year of a life in mourning.

Keywords:

Repetition, mourning, endurance, haptic and interiority

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Dedication

Investigating the concept of art as memoir means that everyone close to you gets pulled into the process. It becomes a joint project where the subjects can inform the output as much as the artist. I want, first of all, to thank my mother for her willingness to be in front of the camera for extended periods of time. It is her complete trust in me, and her adventurous spirit, that has allowed such an intimate portrait of an individual and of the universal experience of aging. More specifically she is a model example of a person facing the reality of the indignities of aging with Alzheimer's with strength, grace and patience. We are in this together, learning our way through this profoundly challenging disease and we are not alone.

My eleven-year-old son was with me the day we rode the ambulance five years ago because of his grandmother's debilitating stroke. She has lived with us full-time ever since, and Isaac has been the bright smile on Rosemary's face every moment she is near him. The mutual admiration between them is lovely to watch. I would like to thank Isaac for his patience and his strength through all of the challenges he faces everyday.

I have had several cheerleaders and confidants through this MFA that reminded me that the late nights and the intermittent, doubting times are fleeting. Thank you to my sister Vivian, and her husband Kevin; my mother's caregivers, Suhera and Almez. Thank you to all my friends that never said they were tired of hearing me talk about mourning, the everyday, critical theory, and my sometimes overwhelming life.

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Everything In Slow Motion

An Exhibition of Video and Photography Installation

By

Roberta McNaughton

Introduction

In representing myself in this autoethnographic project I look to the genetic connections between myself and my mother, and myself and my son. I photograph myself alongside them mimicking their hand gestures. My son's fingernails are seemingly identical to my fingernails; or in the case of my mother I imagine my own mortality and my own failing, aging of the body. I also address the sometimes-awkward fate of the caregiver in that the focus of care goes to those around them. When the caregiver is out of balance, there is no time for self-care or attention to his or her own personal achievements or desires. I depict my own image by showing my feet or hands when they are in the act of aiding my mother by washing her hands, or putting on her shoes.

Art As Autoethnography

My studio research is centered on the vantage point of myself as caregiver. It is a view to a life that is determined by the duties that are required of me. Some of the events are by choice and others are by necessity. The film and photos I shoot display the daily routines and struggles of my mother – eighty years of age and in mid to late stage Alzheimer's,¹ and myself – artist/mother/daughter and full-time caregiver to my mother and part-time co-parent to my eleven-year-old son. My intent is to reveal the at times profoundly painful and yet routinely banal act of caring for a life just begun and a life in the process of retrogenesis.² I am attempting to document this

¹ Excerpt from the Alzheimer's Society website: Alzheimer's | Stage 6: "Severe cognitive decline (Moderately severe or mid-stage Alzheimer's disease) At this stage individuals may: Loose awareness of recent experiences as well as of their surroundings, [...] may need help dressing, [...] may need help toileting (wiping, and disposing of tissue), have increasingly frequent trouble controlling their bladder and bowels, [...] compulsive, repetitive behavior like hand-wringing or tissue shredding." http://www.alz.org/alzheimers_disease_stages_of_alzheimers.asp#stage6. Accessed February 25, 2015

² retrogenesis: (paraphrased) A scientific term to describe a cognitive return to childhood. <http://medical-dictionary.thefreedictionary.com/Retrogenesis>. Accessed February 25, 2015

caregiver experience through a sensory understanding of the embodiment of mourning. I film and photograph the subjects, objects and surroundings of the repetitive routine tasks of caregiving, in the hopes of capturing a sensory experience of that moment in time.

The photographs in my installation are hung in a grid formation that meanders, with gaps of empty space and with multiple different scales of images. My installation format is borrowing greatly from the work of Wolfgang Tillmans. He is a German-born (born 1968) commercial photographer who installs some of his celebrity photos alongside his own personal shots of his daily life. The varying scale of his images, the placement of each photo in relation to the others, and the matter-of-fact snap shots of everyday objects all speak to the interiority of the moment in which he took the photographs. The multiplicity of images in my thesis work are in communication with each other via their placement on the wall and adjacency to each other in a very similar format to how Tillmans has installed his work. The goal of this installation of photographs is intended for the viewer to access a view on life in the presence of Alzheimer's and possibly have the images trigger their own personal memories of domesticity, family, aging, and childhood.

The first step for me in beginning this project was to brace myself for working in this very personal realm. This autoethnographic method was new to me and a bit daunting. *The SAGE Dictionary of Social Research Methods* (Jupp 2006) describes the term autoethnography as being “used both by qualitative researchers in the social sciences, who emphasize the connections between ethnography and autobiography, and by literary critics who are mainly concerned with the voices of ethnic autobiographers” (Reed-Danahay, Jupp 15).

Autoethnography is, “a form of self-narrative that places the self within a social context” (Reed-Danahay, Jupp 15). In my case the social context would be the position of a caregiver sandwiched between a young child and an aging parent. I am not alone in this situation; in fact I fit perfectly into the statistical framework of a growing population of North Americans sandwiched between old and young dependants.³ Autoethnography is described as a form of self-narrative that places the self within the larger social context. It combines autobiography and ethnography. Ethnography performs various forms of fieldwork used in combination to understand the customs of individual peoples and cultures. This mix of methodologies works under the assumption that personal engagement with the subject is the key to understanding the culture. It is a form of study that is thought to work well to unpack cultures or social settings that are hidden due to their private nature: childhood, aging and death to name a few.⁴

Mourning and Alzheimer’s

Childhood, caregiving, motherhood and aging are rich with intimate moments of personal engagement shared privately between family members. In my autoethnographic methodology, I hoped to capture a window into that intimacy and to demonstrate how the mourning process starts before the

³ The aging of the population, higher life expectancies and the shift in emphasis from institutionalized care to home care may suggest that more chronically ill, disabled and frail people are relying on help from family and friends than in the past. In 2012, 28% of caregivers could be considered “sandwiched” between caregiving and childrearing, having at least one child under 18 years living at home. In the majority of these cases (82%), caregivers were raising children under the age of 15: 31% had children 4 and under, 38% had children aged 5 to 9, and 42% had children aged 10 to 14. <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/89-652-x/89-652-x2013001-eng.htm#a11>. Accessed February 15, 2015

⁴ The information on autoethnography was gathered from the University of Strathclyde website which relies significantly on the book, *Introduction to Ethnography and Autoethnography: The SAGE Dictionary of Social Research Methods* (Jupp 2006) <http://www.strath.ac.uk/aer/materials/6furtherqualitativeandresearchdesignandanalysis/unit5/introductiontoethnographyandautoethnography/> Accessed February 15, 2015

death of a loved one with Alzheimer's. There are many phrases to describe the process that the family goes through in caring for their partner or parent with Alzheimer's. In *The American Journal of Alzheimer's Care and Related Disorders*, author Anne Lambert quotes some frequently used phrases to describe the degenerative effects of Alzheimer's on the family. She says that the process of the decline has been called "death by inches" or "the continual funeral". (Lambert 35)

I have also heard it called "the long goodbye". I like to think of it as a return to the infant self. Scientists call this process retrogenesis, a cognitive return to birth. When framed this way, we can see her lapses in judgment, or abilities as endearing behaviours of her child self. It is easier to accept it this way, and in fact it can be funny and fun for all of us to engage with her present toddler self. My mother has always preferred to say, "so be it" in life and laugh about whatever comes her way. She is well cared for, so she is generally happy and playful when we are playful. She has been through a lifetime of not following the status quo, and she has had many major heartbreaks and challenges that she has overcome with great success, so to this day she is a master at facing hardship with laughter and flexibility. She never married and remained single all of my life. If she was ever asked if she wished she had married, she would laugh – giggle even – and say "god no!" I asked her this last year and she gave the same response. Her career was her life's passion. She was on the move, living in exotic beach locations from her early 50's until her 67th birthday when she moved back to Toronto. Her career as a hospital executive in healthcare and addiction meant that she spent a lifetime saving lives and this gave her great satisfaction. In fact, she was working as a consultant until the day of her stroke five years ago (75 years old), which left her unable to care for herself.

My son remembers his frequent sleepovers at his grandmother's condominium in the Toronto beaches area. He remembers days at the beach and his grandmother reading him books and making him Kraft Dinner (his favourite). He also remembers her watching movies with him and generally being silly and indulging him as some grandmothers will. So, although we are accustomed to her changed state, we are still all shocked and quietly frightened when big shifts in her abilities disappear. In these times, we wait and see and mourn the loss of who she was last month, or who she was three months before.

All kinds of grief can be felt in the body through quantifiable effects: shortness of breath, tightness in the throat and chest, numbness and headaches to name a few.⁵ As I was taking the photographs and observing my subject, I listened to my own body and the sensory information and I attempted to visualize these effects in my photographs. In photographing my mother I also attempted to mimic, through the photographs, the effects she feels with her loss of cognitive abilities. This was revealed through speaking with her directly to discover her perspective, and through my own empathetic awareness of the moment. Blurry, disconnected images with gaps in the information came into play.

The experience of taking the photographs relates directly to my research of the haptic experience and a viscosity of the senses. I looked to the writing of two theorists, Giuliana Bruno and Laura U. Marks who speak to haptic viscosity in film and visual art. Marks talks about these images as being grainy, with long exposure, or over-exposure, "these disembodied and

⁵ Information garnered from Bereaved family of Ontario's list of physical symptoms of grief. <http://www.bfo-ottawa.org/documents/SymptomsOfGrief.pdf> Accessed February 27, 2015

floating images [that] approach the viewer not through the eyes alone but along the skin". (Marks 2)

A grainy image with a shallow depth of field does not allow us to inhabit the space like a crisp photograph with a clear depth of field does. With a blurred image (or even over-exposed or grainy image) we float on the surface of the photograph and therefore we are more likely to access an emotional response rather than inhabit the space. This kind of viscosity in a photograph, or in a film can trigger an emotive even bodily, memory of touch, smell, or any of the senses before an intellectual response arises. Marks and Bruno would suggest that we experience these images, these surfaces, with our bodies. Before discovering Marks and Bruno's writing, I was experimenting with over-exposed, grainy, almost hallucinogenic images with my photography, in an attempt to describe my mother's view of her world and also my experience of the haze of emotional response that accompanies the prolonged mourning in caring for someone with Alzheimer's. Before reading about this concept of haptic viscosity in film I wanted my own video of my mother's face to be so close so as to feel as if you were touching her skin. When I came across Marks' and Bruno's writing, I was given the confirmation that I was looking for. Their writing then began to open up new explorations into other surfaces, surfaces that Bruno likens to a kind of skin that the eye touches. I began to pay attention to dust, fog, and dirt, and I began an even deeper exploration into wrinkles and damages to the skin: all elements that suggest the necessity of time and care.

A Material Shift To Photography and Video

In the process of my studio work in this project I came to realize that my material of choice for the past twenty-five years, paint, was not adequate to

capture the immediacy I wanted to express in this project. In attempting to convey a tacit understanding of my subject, I felt I needed the viewer to feel like they are present with the reality of the routine so as to connect with the experience of mourning or loss. In researching the self-portrait and mourning in photography I came across a journal article that speaks to photography's ability to bring the subject to life and in turn freeze them in time. In *Eternal Return: Self-Portrait Photography as a Technology of Embodiment*, Amelia Jones remarks on the somewhat macabre nature of capturing the self in a photograph. "The photograph, after all, is a death-dealing apparatus in its capacity to fetishize and congeal time. [...] the self-portrait photograph is eminently performative and so life-giving" (Jones 949). I sense my own impulse in this work to capture and hold on to what is slipping away: searching for that life-giving aspect of photography and film. There is also a significant element of memorializing this moment of time in this work as I photograph my mother's moles on her skin, the same moles that I examined and fiddled with as a child.

This decision to use photography as the finished work was a revelation in my practice that has released me from the conflict between my sedentary painting studio and my caregiving duties. I have moved photography from being merely the source material for my painting to being the finished work in itself. The joy of this is that I have a mobile studio now. Five hours taking my mother to the dentist is now also five hours in the studio. The hour it takes to give her a shower, the ten hours over the weekend with her at my son's swim meet, the three hours it takes to pick my mother up from respite care are all potentially studio time.

I considered the feminist consequences in this revelation of adjusting my studio practice to fit my caregiving duties. According to *The American Journal*

of Alzheimer's Care & Related Disorder & Research, 74% of all home caregivers of family members with Alzheimer's are female.⁶ This is a feminist concern because further study shows that there is an increased chance of financial dependence for the caregiver.

Upon some preliminary analyses of the 244 primary family caregivers, this author has found that 24 percent of the respondents report their occupation as "caregiver." An additional 29 percent of the caregivers reported having had to reduce their work hours or having to quit working to meet the ever increasing demands of providing care. (Guerrero Austrom, Hendrie 20)

The personal and financial facts that surround the issues of caregiving are of great interest to me, but for this project I am more concerned with the artistic and theoretical framing of the personal choice to alter my medium and studio practice to fit my caregiving responsibilities. This shift in my studio practice came from the work and the aesthetic choices of the work, but it also came from the practical functions of my duties. It was an important shift that needed to be investigated. In my section on methodology, *Switching Media*, I give an overview of how Julia Kristeva and Griselda Pollock position the female artist/ philosopher as having a particular gendered brilliance while working within the restraints of their duties and within the interpersonal relationships of their everyday lives.

Family History And Photography

The stories of everyday lives and photography have played a major role in my extended family's life. We have a long history of documenting ourselves. Like

⁶ "244 primary caregivers of Alzheimer's disease patients responded to the family caregiver questionnaire - a 47 item questionnaire designed for the study. Subjects were primarily female (74 percent) and ranged in age from 29 to 85." (Guerrero Austrom 17)

all the rest of my family, I have two suitcases full of family photographs dating back to the late 1800's. Whenever our family gets together in rural Saskatchewan, much of the time is spent with all the photos spread out on the table going through them and passing on stories and facts that have somehow not yet been told. The elders attempt to remember who is in the photo and whose name has been left out of the printing on the back so that we can add it for future generations to see. As a child, I was aware that when I wrote on the back of a photo I had taken that I was writing a note to my future grandchildren.

I have that same impulse now, but this time the images I create reveal glimpses into the emotional terrain of a year in my life. I use video to document the intimacy of our relationship. I use photography to document the youth and age of our skin and compare our hands and feet to one another. I see myself in my mother and worry that my fate will follow hers as it has in my recently becoming a single parent. It is the prolonged mourning process of Alzheimer's, and to a lesser degree of raising a child in divorce that informs my direction in this work of the everyday routine of the caregiver.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

My research asks the question: what can a six minute video portrait and photographing my caregiver routines teach me about mourning and endurance through a passage of struggle, and how can I communicate the interiority of the moment in which the photograph was taken? In this chapter I look at three elements of my theoretical research that support this question. The first section talks about my starting point into a feminist perspective of narrative, in both the unsedimented language that Hélène Cixous champions and my perspective of the importance of the personal as a position of value. My research into a feminist language allowed me the freedom to investigate emotion as a subject through the theoretical framework of Giuliana Bruno's exploration of the psychogeographic and the emotive experience of space. In the fourth section, I connect how the photographic investigation into my everyday routines speaks to what Kathleen Stewart calls *Ordinary Affects* and the potential in ordinary things to tell a story of the emotional content of their use.

The Unfixed Narrative

The root of my research is centered on several feminist theorists' position on how women create. I began my investigation with two theorists: Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous. I listened to the call of these two writers for women to create a new female language that does not follow the same criteria of a masculine-centred thought. Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous both speak of women needing to create their own language if they are to have any agency at all. It is Luce Irigaray's statement that "If we continue to speak in this

sameness – speak as men have spoken for centuries, we will fail each other” (Irigaray 205). That was my starting point. Early on in my thesis I was investigating what a female hero would be from a feminist perspective and I was looking for a new language to understand what it means to be a female hero. I then came to Hélène Cixous. Cixous talks about women writing outside of the phallogentric language where everything must be categorized and fixed in definition. Cixous attempts to open up and render infinite and shifting meanings instead of a more masculine form of writing that looks to produce sedimented and fixed meanings. As V. A. Conley notes on Hélène Cixous’ writing, “The subject is no longer a fixed entity, closed onto itself, but is, by definition, always in movement toward the other. The limit between self and other is being redefined.” (Conley 10) These theorists’ words also pushed me away from my original intent for this project, which was to present my struggle through the concept of the female hero and the common everywoman hero. I abandoned the female hero project to concentrate on my own personal story of endurance. The hero narrative, by Cixous’ definition, is a masculine-centred fiction, it is very linear in its purpose: there is one fixed result in the journey of the hero and that is to overcome great obstacle and succeed at the goal at hand. This is, in a sense, a fixed path of meaning that is incongruous with what I was reading. Before I leave the topic of my original thesis behind, I would like to give some insight into why I was interested in the subject of a female hero and how I transitioned into my final work about my personal experience of mourning, routine, a sensory/ emotive visuality, and the caregiver perspective.

When I began my research on this thesis two years ago, I was intent on finding a way to describe a female hero in my art that wasn’t a mere copy of the masculine model of hero. I wanted to understand what a feminist hero(ine) might look like. I was looking for mentors/ hero(ines) to guide me

through a difficult time in my life. The figure of the hero has always been a fascination for me and I have always seen the hero tale as something that related to the stories of the common woman's struggle through hardship. I am a Toronto-raised woman but I have strong family ties to the Prairies where relaying personal history was a regular form of entertainment for the elders of the rural homesteading town of my heritage. Like a platoon that survives the war, the elders that survived pioneering the land and the Great Depression rejoiced in telling stories of hardship and survival. In their oral history, everyday people were elevated to centre stage. The minutiae of their lives retold became fascinating tales of adventure for me. My family's personal stories gave me a sense of pride and a way to see myself plotting my way through any struggle I may find myself in. The message of these visits to the homestead was that the endurance and perseverance of the everywoman must be celebrated and that we as individuals must tell our own history.

It was this perspective of valuing individual histories and understanding the importance of retelling the common everyday events from our personal histories that spoke to me in my studio work as I attempted to reconcile the notion of a feminist hero in my readings. The turning point in my thesis away from the hero began with the video I made of my mother titled, *Repeated Attempts At Connection: A Staring Contest in Three Parts*. There are elements of the heroic in the scale and close cropping of my mother's face in this video, but my focus turned more toward elevating the personal mundane act of endurance through struggle in this piece. The phrase "men take action, women endure" rang in my ear during this time. It is a clichéd phrase of unknown origin that nonetheless relates to some of the ideas expressed in the book *Female Genius*. In it, Julia Kristeva questions the notion of women's lack of agency. She dissects the assumptions that women's only function is towards service. "Of course, it has long been asserted that women's only

genius is the genius of their patience, whereas style is the exclusive province of men". (Kristeva, Hannah Arendt xii) How do I reconcile this comment with my own experience when I am one of these women who endure in the service of caring for my mother? Could my action be to communicate the experience of enduring so as to better understand the role of women as caregivers?

I believed it was important to give a voice to the very private work of caregiving. I had never created work this personal before. It was a vulnerable situation to be in, but the response to the personal aspect of the video of my mother was overwhelmingly positive, so I expanded my investigation into photographing my mother and the tasks of my everyday job as caregiver. This of course expanded to include my perspective of caring for my son as well, but to a lesser degree. I felt it necessary to focus more on the aspect of mourning which is, of course, highly concentrated on my mother's cognitive decline and her impending death. When I embarked on this project I was aware of the famous phrase "the personal is political" from the second-wave feminist movement from the 1960's, I had the clear perspective that the personal has been instrumental in feminist aesthetics in art.⁷ The phrase calls attention to the connections between our personal experience and the larger social and political structures within the culture.

⁷ In my estimation, the feminist aesthetic looks to break down the restrictive control of cultural norms over women's bodies and women's roles in society. Western women artists of the 1960's and beyond began to concentrate on work that centred on the personal and the body and broke the "good girl" taboos of the time. A pioneer of this aesthetic, and considered one of the earliest "confessional" artists by some, Louise Bourgeois created a lifetime of performance, sculpture and drawings that focused on her own childhood. She talked openly about her psychoanalytic exploration into her most disturbing memories involving her father with pieces like her phallus shaped sculpture titled *Fillette* (Little Girl) In a photograph by Robert Mapplethorpe, Bourgeois famously clutches under her arm her medium dog-sized plaster and latex penis sculpture with its pronounced testicles. Her trademark hair in a bun, her petite elderly frame and her mischievous smile, belie the revolutionary nature of her work.
<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/mapplethorpe-louise-bourgeois-ar00215>

This route of examining the personal became my path to creating a new language as both Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray demanded. To determine that this is a new language and not a repeat of what Cixous calls a masculine-centred language, one must first define the language one is trying to separate oneself from. Irigaray defines a masculine language as one that is rooted in tautological underpinnings. Logic is at the core of a masculine language. Like Cixous, she sees the history of masculine language as being autological, fixed, or in a closed system. Irigaray says that it is, "...more of a question of breaking out of the autological and tautological circle of systems of representation and their discourse so as to allow women to speak their sex" (Irigaray 97). "Logic", "linear" and "fixed" are the key words here for a masculine language. In Cixous' philosophy, she sees a feminine form of writing as, "very close to the flesh of language, much more so than masculine texts... perhaps because they don't rush into meaning, but are straightway at the threshold of feeling" (Cixous 54). It is Cixous' passionate, visceral texts about the body and emotion that I relate to in my practice. It is Hélène Cixous' writing that allowed my research to investigate emotion as a direction of scholarly study and this is where I came to the film theorist Giuliana Bruno.

I would like to clarify that I am speaking of this binary between feminine and masculine as being between two different kinds of language and not between men and women. I will diverge here for a moment to allow for a third theoretical voice that rejects a binary system of the sexes. It is not a philosophy that I have used in my practice, but I cite it here to show my awareness of a more contemporary feminist viewpoint to the masculine feminine constructs. A more current position from philosopher Judith Butler says that she rejects the idea of a binary definition of gender: man/ woman. She talks about the body (or our sex) as being a discursive construction that is formulated through social norms. It is not that our body doesn't exist, but

that it doesn't exist prior to our discursive understanding of it. We are taught through repetitive acts how to become our sex. A boy is not born knowing how to keep his pinky down while holding a fork, how to not wear pink, or how to squash his impulse to cry at an upsetting situation. He is taught through a multitude of obvious and obtuse punitive actions. Through a lifetime of societal norms, his movement and his body is moulded to conform to the gender norms of his time. A girl, through a lifetime of repetitive actions, learns to flip her hair and sway her hips; and she learns through a million little punitive actions to keep her legs closed and think like a girl. As Butler writes, "Performative is that discursive practice that enacts or produces that which it names. Through the sedimentation process our material bodies are created. We learn how to sway our hips and carry our bodies according to our prescribed gender" (Butler 24). I added Butler's viewpoint here as a counterpoint to what I am about to argue. What I find more in line with my inquiry are the words of Hélène Cixous and the related theory of emotions by Giuliana Bruno, whom I will talk about in the next section.

Emotion As Subject

Giuliana Bruno's book, *Atlas of Emotion: Journeys in Art, Architecture, and Film* speaks of a feminist view of space as being an emotive experience where all the senses are drawn into play. She writes: "The spectator is rather a *voyageur*, a passenger who traverses a haptic, emotive terrain. Through this shift, my aim is to reclaim emotion and to argue [. . .] for the haptic as a feminist strategy of reading space" (*Atlas of Emotion: Journeys in Art, Architecture and Film* 16). In this quote and in Bruno's writing the haptic is meant as more than just a form of communication through touch. Bruno's belief is that all of our senses are at play in a feminist reading of space. As a film theorist, Bruno frequently talks about a female experience of space as

psychogeographical, where space is organized and, consciously or unconsciously, and understood through the emotions and behaviours of others. In photographing my everyday routines and the interactions I have in those tasks that involve my mother and my son, it is my intent to convey the unspoken interplay of our relationships. I have purposely avoided photographing their faces for two reasons. I don't want the work to speak to specific people as much as to communicate the underlying emotional content. The photographs in particular are cropped portions of bodies: my son's rash under his arm, my mother's skin growth on her thigh, and the varicose veins on my knees. These images are all about some level of physical discomfort. I believe that the experience of touch can be communicated through poignant, specific details of the body and our surroundings. This initial instinct of mine to concentrate on the details of skin and other surfaces is something that Giuliana Bruno investigates in depth.

Bruno's most recent book from 2014, *Surface: Matters of Aesthetics, Materiality, and Media* describes the surface of things as having a life. In chapter ten, "On Dust, Blur, and the Stains of Time, A 'virtual' Letter to Sally Potter", Bruno analyses the film *Yes* by her friend Sally Potter. Bruno speaks to Potter about her film and how it "recognizes the function of veneers, *pellicules*, thin residues – film" (*Surface: Matters of Aesthetics, Materiality, and Media* 238). In the film and in Bruno's argument, dust is a form of sediment and therefore is describing layers of time and movement: "Dust comes to the surface as an archival deposit, and such sedimentary yet moving particles are shared by life and film" (*Surface: Matters of Aesthetics, Materiality, and Media* 238). She likens these things like dust and skin to being a map. The wrinkles of time that can guide the eye to a life lived. In this she sees the surface as something that enables intimacy. Even pain can be visualized. Bruno talks

about Sally Potter's film, in which the maid speaks of the visual knowledge she gathers about the families she cleans for.

Pain leaves a stain. It can be visible as a mark; it leaves a film. It is imprinted on the skin, as on a bed. Absorbed by the surface of living, pain is deposited on the living surface. The soil of life is a sediment, just like "film" or [...] real dirt. (*Surface: Matters of Aesthetics, Materiality, and Media* 238)

Bruno's writing came to inform my studio practice. It enriched a visual effect I had already begun using in my photos of my mother. I often used a skin of barrier between her and myself in the photograph. I was photographing her in the fog of the shower, or behind the fog of a car windshield as a way of expressing the distancing that her disease creates. It also seemed to me to be a visual cue to suggest daydreaming, or more accurately, I see it as an entry point to portraying my interior dialogue within the moment. The fog represents the glazing over of sight that happens when one is deep in thought: I see it as a way of referencing the intimate knowledge of our thoughts and feelings. It is a visual representation of two things, the tunnel vision that happens when one is in mourning, and that haze of thought that happens when we are performing routine, everyday tasks that carry the heavy weight of personal meaning.

Everyday Objects Leave A Physical Trace

At this point in my research it became necessary to investigate the everyday and the things that surround us. I began photographing the spaces and the objects that surround me in my routines: objects that speak to the life and routine of domesticity and caring for the elderly or the young. I understood that the objects and environments of these tasks would tell a story that strict portraiture of the body could not. Anthropologist Kathleen Stewart poetically

put into words what I was trying to express in the visual image of things. In her book, *Ordinary Affects*, she writes about the intangible meandering of our internal thoughts and the sensory experience of things. Objects don't live outside of the context of themselves. They tell a story of how they are used, where they are used and what attachments or nostalgia we may have for them.

The potential stored in ordinary things is a network of transfers and relays. Fleeting and amorphous, it lives as a residue or resonance in an emergent assemblage of disparate forms and realms of life. Yet it can be as palpable as a physical trace. Potentiality is a thing immanent to fragments of sensory experience and dreams of presence. A layer, or layering to the ordinary, it engenders attachments or systems of investment in the unfolding of things. (Stewart 21)

Ordinary Affects reads like a dream with the author seemingly able to enter into the internal musings of many different ordinary experiences. In my installation of photographs on the wall, I intended to mimic the ebb and flow of life: movement through time. The eye follows the syncopated arrangement of photographs installed on the gallery wall: left to right, top to bottom, they appear to ebb and flow in the mind's eye as the viewer follows the arrangement of images in their adjacencies. The larger scale images bring the viewer's focus to attention, while others are smaller and perhaps may be skipped over, or require more time to discover. A photograph of a stuffed toy Superman hung up on a bedroom wall sits on its own on the gallery wall above the other photos, closer to the ceiling. This is my attempt to visualize what Stewart describes as "rhythms of significance":

Ordinary life, too, draws its charge from rhythms of flow and arrest. Still lifes punctuate its significance: the living room strewn with ribbons and wine glasses after a party, the kids or dogs asleep in the back seat of the car after a great (or not so great) day at the lake, the collection of sticks and rocks resting on the dashboard in the closet, the moments of humiliation or shock that suddenly lurch into view without warning, the odd moments of spacing out when a strange malaise comes over you, the fragments of experience that pull at ordinary awareness but rarely come into full frame. (Stewart 19)

I want the viewer to draw their own connections between the images, but I also want to guide them in the same way that the mind wanders in thought and meaning, or significance. Stewart's writing on affect talks of the kind of layered significance and learning that I aim to achieve in my installation. As she writes, "Affects are not so much forms of signification, or units of knowledge, as they are expressions of ideas or problems performed as a kind of involuntary and powerful learning and participation" (40). In the same book, she further highlights the ways in which affects work when she quotes Alphonso Lingis' book *The Society of Dismembered Body Parts: in Deleuze and the Theatre of Philosophy*. Lingis describes the jump in affect that happens to him in his description of touring a mine at the Arctic Circle.

The young miner who showed me the mine put out every cigarette he smoked on his hand, which was covered with scar tissue. Then I saw the other young miners all had the backs of their hands covered with scar tissue. . . . when my eye fell on them it flinched, seeing the burning cigarette being crushed and sensing the pain. . . . The eye does not read the meaning in a sign; it *jumps* from the mark to the pain and the burning cigarette, and then jumps to the fraternity signaled by the burning cigarettes. (Lingis 1993)

It is this observation of affect that I intended to mimic. Each photographic image in my installation is dependent on the collection as a whole to describe the greater narrative of domestic routine and mourning through loss.

Chapter 3

Methodology

This tacit understanding of events, this embodiment of emotion is a form of knowledge that is integral to my studio methodology. In the section below, *Photographs: Giving A Shower As Autoethnographic Methodology*, I walk through the process of how I incorporate a sensory experience in my studio work and how I attempt to create a viscosity of the senses from that experience. The methodology of my practice continues with the exploration of a feminist view in knowledge production, in that I look to events as inclusive of emotions and I position myself in relation to my subject(s). I talk in the second section below about how I came to surfaces as a way to convey the interiority of the everyday and the effect of mourning.

A Feminist View to Research

My studio practice is in direct line with the tenets of feminist research in the sciences that question the methods of a positivist outlook that is based on value-free objectivity and that would seek to uncover “facts” and universal “truth”. My video and photographic research is aligned with the way in which feminist research methods have been described: “contextual, inclusive, experiential, involved, socially relevant, inclusive of emotions and events as experienced” (Nielson 6).

The Structure of Photographing Routine

With the guidance of Giuliana Bruno’s writing about surface of things, and my “experiential” methods, I began a “close observation” of the marks on the skin

of all three of us through the use of a macro lens. These moles, wrinkles, and scars that tell a story of time and intimacy and perhaps even my own fear of mortality. I was never so concerned with death until I became responsible for a young life. Now I am middle-aged and living with my mother's health and cognitive abilities in decline: at its worst it can feel like mortality is a threatening guest in the house and I am the one to keep her at bay. So, I photograph the damages to the skin that come from illness, accident, or age to speak to the psychogeographic mapping that Bruno posits as an entry point into the visual experience of touch. In an interview with Sarah Oppenheimer for *Bomb Magazine*, Bruno talks about how surfaces have been denigrated. She points out that people talk about surfaces as superficial, but she doesn't see it that way.

The skin is a membrane that breathes, connecting outside and inside, and it defines the contours of our bodies, of our selves. So the first surface is our body and we communicate with others through touch. In this sense, the surface is a zone of encounter between us and the space that surrounds us. (Bruno, Oppenheimer 2014)

These marks on our skin speak to my role as in-house doctor, to taking care of the medical issues in the family. A valuable skill that came to me with motherhood is that I learned to anticipate worst-case scenarios so that I could help my son and now my mother avoid them. The weight of this responsibility wanes as my son gets older and more able to monitor himself, but the stress of this job becomes more pronounced as my mother ages and her cognitive abilities regress to those of her infant self. These medical issues are one of the multitude of jobs as a caregiver that demand my time and attention that and can be fraught with stress. This encompasses stress from the health of my loved one, as well as stress from the time that these tasks take away from my job, my social life, and my own self-care.

This responsibility of health care is a repetitive task that is a mainstay of mother-work so my “close observation” includes photographs of each doctor’s visit, including images from the waiting rooms as I sit outside or inside the offices to the ailment of the body if it is visible on the skin.

The structure I have imposed on the photographic portion of *Everything In Slow Motion* is fairly simple and follows an “autoethnographic participant observation” model. The participants that I observe are my mother and my son. The autoethnographic portion of my research exists in how I am positioned between my mother and my son. I photograph the tasks of my caregiving position that repeat daily, weekly, and monthly. In this list of tasks, I am conscious of which of these jobs impact my emotional state the most and so these are the photographs that gain the most attention and are most present in the final exhibition. They may be larger in scale, or they may repeat several times within the installation.

In this project, I aim to be respectful of my mother’s dignity, but I also have been disappointed by the glossy depictions of Alzheimer’s I have seen in films and I want to address the reality of the body as it ages. The reality in illness, or with age, is that the body is less contained, less reliably under our control. This is a fear for all of us in aging: that we must relinquish the control we feel we have with our bodies. This reality lives large when Alzheimer’s removes the brain’s understanding of bodily functions. This is the point when caregiving becomes physical as well as emotional. Cloth diapers are ubiquitous on a daily basis in our household, and their smell is so emotionally charged that they deserve some representation in the installation. One photograph is of a white cloth diaper with its translucent plastic cover, sitting wet in the sink ready to be washed. The photograph has been placed in the

gallery on top of a pedestal that is the approximate size and height of a common bathroom vanity.⁸

I witnessed an exhibition of Toronto artist Robert Flack's mixed media photographs at the McDonald Stewart Art Centre (Guelph, Ontario) in 1993 and the impact of that show still resonates with me today. This exhibition *This Is True To Me* was concentrated on details of the body's chakra points. The seven chakra points, in the Hindu and other belief systems, are energy points of the body that can be accessed through meditation and other modalities to help unify the mind and the body. The artist was suffering from AIDS and terminally ill when making this work and it was clear from the photographs that he had come to a place of peace and greater understanding, perhaps through the making of the work. All of the photographs were detailed images of the body and its chakra points. Some of the closely cropped body parts had the over-saturated colours of a radiating circular pattern projected on to them and some of the photographs of the body had been layered over with a meticulously painted mandala-like image on translucent film. Mandalas-like images radiated outward from the chakra points.

One image in particular stood out to me as the most impactful image of emanating beauty, surrender and vulnerability: this was a closely framed image of a sphincter with a mandala lovingly surrounding, and radiating outward from it: the fleshy, hairy muscle was shockingly intimate. The work spoke to an acceptance and love for the whole body and self/ soul. It wasn't a sexualized image per se; it was an image of vulnerability and surrender to the

⁸ It is necessary to use cloth diapers because disposable diapers have been flushed down the toilet on two occasions.

power that is within us and greater than the physical body. It is also interesting to note that the mandala in many of these photographs are painted on a translucent film that acts like the skin in the theories of Giuliana Bruno and Laura U. Marks talk about. Flack uses the film and the mandala as the bridge between the external and the internal, as I use fog and a translucent shower curtain to access the interiority of the moment.

Health and medical care is present in my life on a daily basis. Eleven medications for my mother's diabetes and high blood pressure are taken three times a day. I monitor her blood sugar and blood pressure regularly and I am very attuned to her appearance to catch any changes in sugar levels. It is low-level nursing that causes both a conscious and unconscious stress. The role of mother and daughter has been inverted, and it is a challenging reality to embrace. Alzheimer's was the fate of my mother's mother and so I superstitiously, fleetingly, insert myself, in my mother's position and attempt to care for her how I would want to be cared for myself if this is in fact a hereditary condition for me. I can't help but think of my own aging when living so close to my mother and all the genetic traits that we share. I photograph myself with my own signs of aging and physical vulnerability. I look to the physical points of comparison between our two bodies: mother and daughter. In the video I show myself in a separate projection staring back at her in our staring contest. I am across the room and we wait to see who "blinks" or who stops staring first. It is a waiting game that is the fate of all our lives. Who will go first?

With this caregiving job, I spend a considerable amount of time waiting: in medical centres and swim clubs, so these are images that repeat again and again in the wall installation. These images are about repetition and waiting so they are very still and are more carefully composed than other images.

Weekly showers of my mother are busy and intimate, so they are more furtively shot and about visually attempting to describe our connection and intimacy, unlike the waiting rooms and swim clubs that are distant and still. The way I have experimented with representations of intimacy and the internal dialogue those relationships bring relate to Bruno's discussion of surfaces. I use fog, condensation, water, and translucent curtains as surfaces that cloud and envelop the figure to create a hallucinatory effect. I experimented with these surfaces to employ Bruno's idea that a screen can be a bridge from the external to the internal. Intimacy and the interiority are also shown through using a macro lens for "close observation" of the surface.

I am present in this work in more obscured ways. I am seen in the reflection of surfaces or in my shadow on the ground. Through the winter I jogged on a community centre track three times a week and naturally I photographed this as an example of my intent in the project to focus on endurance and repetition in the project.

Another way I represent myself is by including my body parts that are present on the periphery of the task when I am helping others: my feet, my hands, etc. My son is present in the photographs through the images of his toys, his skin rash, his ruffled bed sheets, repeated images of pools, and other obscured references. My mother's image is seen through the fog of the car windshield, and through the translucent, water drenched shower curtain. Her three-times-daily pills are photographed and blown up many times larger than life, and then they are repeated several times in the installation. Long exposures represent endurance and create blur when photographing her. The video I made of my mother also talks about endurance in that it is six minutes of "nothing". The camera watches her face at close range.

She sits perfectly still in her family room chair and slowly falls asleep. The afternoon sun and the quiet muffled sounds of talk radio soothe the viewer in this intimate portrait of the everyday endurance of aging and caregiving. Although my video is closely aligned with this project, it is a separate work from the photographs with separate parameters so I will describe my methods with this piece in the fourth section of this chapter (*Repeated Attempts At Connection: A Staring Contest in Three Parts*).

Switching Media

It is the domestic world, mourning, and the restrictions, or framework of the caregiver that defines my thesis. How my personal needs and schedule relate or conflict with other's schedules and activities is paramount to the parameters of this work. In a practical way I saw the staccato nature of my daily schedule with conflicting responsibilities pulling me in multiple directions as crucial to my switch from painting to the immediacy of photography. Photography allowed me to have a mobile studio and this switch of media was liberating for me.

For this reason I choose to search out how other women positioned themselves in their practice and how their choice of medium or subject matter is affected by their responsibilities. As the majority of day-to-day caregiver roles are still filled by women, I wanted to see what effect their domestic responsibilities had on their creative output.⁹

⁹ Historically, caregivers have been disproportionately women (Cranswick and Dosman 2008). This was also true in 2012, when an estimated 54% of caregivers were women. Although the median number of caregiving hours was similar between men and women (3 and 4 hours per week, respectively), women were more likely than their male counterparts to spend 20 or more hours per week on caregiving tasks (17% versus 11%). Meanwhile, men were more likely than women to spend less than one hour per week providing care (29% versus 23%).
<http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/89-652-x/89-652-x2013001-eng.htm#a9> Accessed February 26, 2015

In my research I came to Julia Kristeva's book, *Female Genius: Hannah Arendt*, the first in a trilogy. Kristeva, a Bulgarian-born French philosopher, posits that the genius of Hannah Arendt lies in her femaleness. According to Kristeva, it is Arendt's position as a woman that allows her access (and conversely restricts her access) within the practical aspects of the corporeal world, and that places interpersonal relationships at the very centre of Arendt's philosophical investigations.

Gripped from the start by that unique passion in which life and thought are one, Arendt's journey, so turbulent and yet so profoundly coherent, consistently put life – both life itself and life as a concept to be analyzed – at the centre of her work. (Kristeva 4)

Kristeva argues that Arendt was not allowed the freedom from practical duties that would give her the free rein to investigate pure abstract thought like her male contemporaries. She also argues that it is in her female-centered self that interpersonal relationships are integral for her survival.

It is tempting to see this specifically Arendtian trait as a particularly female characteristic, all the more because the "repression" considered so "problematic" in women is what kept Arendt from withdrawing into the obsessive edifices of pure thought and anchored her instead in corporeal experience and in bonds with other people. (Kristeva 4)¹⁰

¹⁰ The increased intensity of caregiving among women may be partly related to the type of tasks commonly performed by them. Women tend to provide care for activities that must be completed on a regular or set schedule. For instance, they were twice as likely as their male counterparts to provide personal care to the primary care receiver, including bathing and dressing (29% versus 13%). Caregivers have multiple responsibilities beyond caring for their chronically ill, disabled or aging family member or friend. In 2012, 28% of caregivers could be considered "sandwiched" between caregiving and childrearing, having at least one child under 18 years living at home. In the majority of these cases (82%), caregivers were raising children under the age of 15. <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/89-652-x/89-652-x2013001-eng.htm#a9> Accessed February 26, 2015

Arendt's genius, the element that sets her apart, is that she employs traditionally feminine characteristics in her philosophy. This voice reveals another kind of philosophy – not of pure theoretical abstraction, but one based in the practical, the common, and the everyday interpersonal relationships.

Visual arts scholar and theorist Griselda Pollock asserts the same position of femaleness to Mary Cassatt's paintings from the Impressionist era of the late 1800's. In her book, *Mary Cassatt: Painter of Modern Women*, Pollock speaks directly to the artist's particular depiction of and relationship to the subject of motherhood. Cassatt painted what she had regular access to, her family, and she painted it in what Pollock deems a self-consciously female way. Pollock sees the interpersonal relationship of the artist and sitter as being at the forefront of the work. Like my own photographs, this intimacy is highlighted in the formal aspects of the composition. Cassatt and myself are both self-consciously focused on interiors, and we both are partial to a shallow depth of field to convey intimacy, familiarity, and as Pollock would suggest: "psychological interiority" or "private reverie" (Pollock 122). Pollock points out that Mary Cassatt's paintings create

... a space that included the artist, looking, painting, thinking, organizing, interacting with her models. Cassatt radically reconceptualized three spaces: the spaces of femininity – the social locus and activity that is being painted; space in painting – the repression of deep space in favor of shallow space, producing the effect of immediate proximity to her sitter; and the space from which the painting was being made. This was her artistic and imaginative space, which occupied by a self-consciously woman artist, renders the viewing position we are offered a historically and psychologically feminine one ... (128).

Repeated Attempts At Connection: A Staring Contest in Three Parts

Interpersonal relationships are expressed through the haptic visuality of touch and the other senses are at the core of my thesis research. This investigation into the personal and the mourning process began with my video, *Repeated Attempts At Connection: A Staring Contest*. I used my mother as the primary subject for this video and myself as a secondary character: I am present in the shake of the handheld camera and I am one of the voices off camera. There is a third voice in this video that is my mother's CCAC¹¹ personal support worker, Suhera. Suhera has been coming to our house every week, four days a week for a couple of hours a day, for the past five years. She is a significant part of the caregiving role, and although I don't position her in this thesis, she is present in more than one photo and of course her voice is in this video. Her position within our family is a whole other thesis in its own right and so I do not delve beyond simply recognizing her contribution here and in my dedication.¹² In the video, I filmed my mother in extreme close up so as to create a kind of intimacy that is not commonly comfortable in person and also to have her projected image replicate the heroic cinematic close up. The banal act of her falling asleep and laughing in front of the camera becomes monumental and profound for the viewer. A fragile life is displayed willingly without any veils, and vulnerability is exposed and accepted. This act of acceptance of fragility becomes necessary. One either laughs or one cries. Mostly we choose to laugh.

¹¹ Community Care Access Centre is a government organization in Toronto that offers free homecare for the elderly. Individuals are assessed several times a year to determine the level of care needed. We started at five hours a week and now receive fifteen hours a week of free care.

¹² In Canada, women predominantly make up the home support labor force, and a high proportion of these women are immigrants and visible minorities (Aronson, Denton & Zeytinoglu, 2004; Neysmeith & Reitsma-Street, 2003) <http://www.crncc.ca/knowledge/factsheets/pdf/InFocus-Ontario%20PSWs%20in%20Home%20and%20Community%20Care.pdf> Accessed February 15, 2015

This video directly responds to my interpretation of the Russian constructivist artist Alexander Rodchenko's photographic portrait of his mother titled *Mother* (1924) in that my work is also an extremely intimate close up of the aging body and it reveals, in my mind, a courageous portrait of a strong character. His mother's face is closely cropped to the black and white photograph's edges. Her features are relaxed but strong. She is so obviously at home with her photographer son staring so closely at her with camera in his hands. There is a heavy weight about her. She looks to have the weary calm of someone who has seen much in her life. In the essay, "New Worlds, New Perspectives" Jackie Wullschlager writes of Rodchenko's portrait of his mother, "elderly Olga Rodchenko, emblem of Russian endurance, peers through a single lens of her spectacles". (2008) The author states that this artwork's formalism and its "distillation of everyday survival caught in a fresh moment, all lift this photograph to greatness". (2008)

I made a close observation of this photograph for the early portrait paintings I was working on before I pulled away from the female hero investigation. I wanted to understand how the cropping of the face and the angle helped to create such a heroic figure from a common elderly woman's face. At this point I was painting the everywoman (myself, my friends, my mother) as heroic and wanted to do the same with this video. I was interested in showing the everyday survival and the exposure of personal vulnerability as a heroic act in and of itself. I hadn't yet abandoned the hero investigation, nor had I moved to the exploration of mourning through photographing my everyday routines within my caregiver position. Through my observations in painting I was inspired to replicate what I had learned from Rodchenko's portrait to the video portrait of my mother.

The project parameters I set up for this video were simple. I hold the camera up as my eyes towards my mother and she stares back at me/ or at the camera. I stop filming when one of us gets tired. I knew that my mother's reactions would be unpredictable because even if I told her the parameters of the staring contest, because of her Alzheimer's, she wouldn't be able to remember what we were doing very quickly after my telling her.

I am present in conversation with my mother and it is our relationship that informs a significant portion of the story in this video. In this respect I am also consciously using the methodology of reflexivity. I am calling attention to myself as researcher within this process. My voice in the video describes my longtime use of my mother as a primary model. I describe how she has responded to my gaze over the many years since my childhood and I give my perception on how I see her responding to modeling for me shifting through her senior years and with the onset of Alzheimer's.

I was coming up to a shift in my direction away from the female hero work and this video was a pivotal turning point. Alongside the research I was doing on female hero(ines) I was also looking at how I could represent the common woman as heroic. I had been looking at the pencil crayon drawings of Annie Pootoogook. She is a contemporary Inuit woman from Cape Dorset and is well known for her intimate and revealing portraits of her everyday life in her rural community. She upends the preconceptions of the Inuit lifestyle with very candid and honest drawings of her family and herself: they watch Jerry Springer, they have unconventional sex, they cut up whale blubber using flattened cardboard boxes as a cutting board on the community centre floor. I saw her art as a courageous act of truth-telling as it exposes her most intimate vulnerabilities. My own video and Annie Pootoogook's drawings became the

impetus for me to embrace the everyday personal experience of my own life and abandon the female hero trope.

Photographs: Giving a Shower as Autoethnographic Methodology

Very soon after this turn I began photographing my daily routines. The following section is a step-by-step view to my studio process for the photographic work in this thesis exhibition. The writing style I use in this section diverges significantly from the rest of this document: what I intend to accomplish with this format of descriptive writing is to allow the reader to be present in what I see as a sensory experience within my studio practice. In this section I also describe my attempt at visualizing my sensory experience within the photographs.

The studio as a haptic experience:

I ask my mother if she would mind me taking some photographs of her while we (Suhera and I) give her a shower. Suhera waits outside the closed bathroom door until the shower has begun. I am the only one allowed in the room for now. My mother does not care about the camera being present, she is more concerned with the impending cold and wetness that is ahead of her. When giving my mother a shower she is in agony from the idea of the pain that the water will cause her. Water is an unknown substance to her at this point in her disease. It is only when it is about to hit her that she is able to remember that it is a shocking experience that causes her discomfort. The mix of difficult emotions we both experience is palpable. It is hard for me to see her so anxious, but I have learned a step-by-step method of instructions that eases the fear for her.

I imagine she is a toddler that is having her first bath. As I walk through the steps of preparing her for the act of cleaning her body we talk through what will happen next. I stop briefly before turning the water on to take photos: she is static with the look of sorrow on her face. After reading Giuliana Bruno's ideas of surface as materiality, I have begun to pay close attention to the details of my mother's wrinkles on parts of her body that are never seen in public. As a child I would examine her face, neck and arms for all its bumps and imperfections. My son does this to me too at times. It is an intimate knowledge of the body as it shifts through time. As I shoot the pictures I ask her questions that will ease her mood and it distracts us both from this unpleasant task of showering that she is terribly afraid of. We have already gone through the process of undressing her so the first unpleasant task is done. I instruct her to sit on her shower bench. To her this is an absurd request. First of all, what is a shower bench, and second of all, that idea is ridiculous – "I'll fall!" Age and especially Alzheimer's disrupts balance. Eventually, she will forget how to stand and walk, sit or even chew food. Eventually, she will forget how to swallow.¹³

She protests the shower with so much pain in her voice, "I don't want this, please don't do this!" I say that it will feel good once the warm water is on her body and that it will feel even better to be clean. I point the heater towards her and the heat disturbs her: too direct. Every bit of this information about her reactions to heat, cold and wetness, and the unknown is taken into

¹³ Excerpt from the Alzheimer's Society website: Stage 7 (final stage) Very severe cognitive decline (Severe or late-stage Alzheimer's disease) "In the final stage of this disease, individuals lose the ability to respond to their environment, to carry on a conversation and, eventually, to control movement. They may still say words or phrases. At this stage, individuals need help with much of their daily personal care, including eating or using the toilet. They may also lose the ability to smile, to sit without support and to hold their heads up. Reflexes become abnormal. Muscles grow rigid. Swallowing impaired." http://www.alz.org/alzheimers_disease_stages_of_alzheimers.asp#stage5 Accessed February 25, 2015

account in my studio practice. I am attempting to empathetically, physically, experience her perception of this shower event. I am interested in visually representing the experiences of emotion attached to the senses within this moment, for her and for me. While she arranges herself on the shower bench I carefully hold her hand and take more photos with my other hand. These photos are rapid and grainy, perhaps even blurred. They speak of busy work and intimacy, beautiful sorrow and vulnerability.

They are furtive photos, taken quickly so as not to prolong the cold experience. I am open to all the ways of knowing that this shared experience can teach me. It is such an intimate act and I need to be so attuned to all my senses so that I can better understand her experience so as to help her overcome her fear. I empathetically imagine how she experiences touch, temperature, sound and smell. I am looking for points of entry into this shared experience of taking a simple shower. I am looking for a deeper understanding of this and ways of representing her without making her uncomfortable. There is little time for contemplation. I have to be quick on my feet. I want to capture her but I am also describing the interplay of this very intimate space and our relationship within it.

At this point, I have no doubt that she has forgotten already that I said I was doing an art project and would it be okay if I take photos of her hands and feet and hair etc., but she trusts me implicitly and doesn't question what I am doing with the camera. She has been my model since I was a child so she is extremely comfortable with being watched and photographed. She always enjoyed the attention. I tell her that I am about to turn the bottom faucet on and it will be loud and cold at first. I tell her to lift her feet and wait for it to warm up. She can still understand most of these instructions for some reason while at the same time she is not able to understand toilet instructions.

In the shower, she lifts her feet and the tub faucet water rushes out with a loud whine and a thundering force. She protests and says that she can't do this, "It's too terrible". Is it the noise, or is it the wetness on her skin that is repellent? I ask myself, is there a way that I can represent repellent noise or disorientation in a photograph? I tell her it will be warm soon and that it will feel so good to be clean. I remain a calm presence and agree that this is unpleasant. I ask her to touch her toes to the warming water and request that she tell me when it gets to the right temperature. She is tentative and as trusting as she can be in this situation. The water is warm: I take a few pictures of her feet in the water. They dangle above the tub water and show the child-like vulnerability of sitting on a highchair. Her feet express so much of her fear and are positioned, as a toddler would cup their feet together. I give my seated mother a face cloth and tell her that soon the water will come out of the top faucet, "up here." I point to where it will come from and say that it will be warm. I tell her that I will count to three and then the water will come out. She is afraid and puts the face cloth over her face. I stand behind the translucent shower curtain and photograph her through the water droplets and curtain wall. The fog is already becoming thick and her figure is fading away.

At this moment, I am reminded of the Canadian artist Ben Reeves' paintings of the everyday and the surfaces that he renders with large rain droplets, obscuring the figures waiting at the bus stop. His use of water droplets is akin to Bruno's concept of the surface as a kind of skin that creates a bridge between the external and internal realities. It appears that he is viewing his pedestrians through the rain-drenched windshield of his car, but the final effect is one of a hallucinogenic haze that brings me into the interiority of the moment. I am excited by this connection with his work to my studio session

and continue to photograph discrete portions of my mother's figure through the blur of the water droplets and fog of the room. I am conscious of her modesty and make sure that I don't print anything at a later date that she would find objectionable. I continue to show her the work as it is in progress to get her reaction. Emotion is one of the faculties of the brain that remains well into the last stage of Alzheimer's so her emotional reactions and awareness of all situations are still dead on. She has always been very open and free with her body, not worrying about anyone's perception of it. As a heavy woman she was obstinate that no one else was going to tell her how her body should look. The romantic love of her life was an artist who she dated for ten years in her thirties before I was born. She frequently modeled for him and later she modeled for me when I was a young adult. She has continued to do so until the present day. I take these things into consideration and progress with the work in full awareness and sensitivity of the position of power I am in.

I see the photographs in this thesis exhibition as a way of marking this time and this stage that we are all at. It is a pivotal time that is momentous in our small family. In photographing my job as caregiver, I am honouring this difficult time by facing it as directly and honestly as I can. What I hope to uncover is a sense of understanding of the intimate workings of our relationship with the hopes of communicating something that others in a similar situation can relate to. What does it mean to lose your self to this disease? How does this situation affect my son's view to his world? I can't answer these questions, but I can investigate these questions through close observation of our routines along this difficult path.

What does it mean to lose myself in the daily tasks of my loved ones lives? Where do I fit myself in, or who am I when they are not there? Again, I look to

close observation of my routines to understand that which is not clear to me. I imagine myself as them and try to see their point of view, but mostly I observe, take care of their needs, and try to describe the everyday experience and the profound experience of it all.

As I see it, this project's focus on these routine tasks culminates in the measure of a life (or three lives) – parsed out in small moments collected and observed.

Communicating Through The Haptic

What I have learned from caring for a young child and a mother with Alzheimer's is that whatever emotion is present in the room becomes the emotion that they reflect back. If love, acceptance and comfort is given to the person with Alzheimer's, then almost always love, acceptance and comfort is given back. In any situation that is difficult, if it is ignored and their discomfort is ignored then they will ignore the love, acceptance and comfort that is offered. It is a subtle interplay that many caregivers are aware of.

Luce Irigaray writes about this level of reversibility, in its extreme, between the fetus/mother, and the daughter/mother relationship in her essay, "The One Doesn't Stir Without The Other". She writes about the moment before there is an intervention of a third party to interrupt the mother/daughter exchange.

There's just a pause: the time for the one to become the other.
Consuming comes before any vision of her who gives herself.
You've disappeared, unperceived-imperceptible if not for this flow
that fills up to the edge. That enters the other in the container of
her skin. That penetrates and occupies the container until it takes
away all possible space from both the one and the other, removes

every interval between the one and the other. Until there is only this liquid that flows from the one into the other, and that is nameless. (The One Doesn't Stir Without The Other 63)

If we were to live in this exchange permanently then we would never be able to come to our own individuality. This is the darker turn that we need to escape from as Irigaray writes in her essay. What I have explored in this project, using the term haptic as a descriptor, is this ability to access this kind of liquid state where the lines of the other are blurred. It is this state that allows us to empathize and to understand better the non-verbal communication of infants, toddlers, and the cognitively impaired. It is a moment where one lets go of the boundaries of self and opens oneself up to the tacit knowledge present in the experience.

I am not the only one investigating this other way of knowing and communicating when it comes to Alzheimer's. There is a burgeoning genre of literature discussing Alzheimer's from a personal perspective, perhaps because of the onslaught of the baby boomers aging and looking after their elderly parents.¹⁴ I can relate to their struggle and wanted to see this kind of narration in a visual art context. In a recent *New Yorker* article, Stefan Merrill Block writes about his experience living with his grandmother with Alzheimer's when he was a twelve-year-old boy, just six months older than my eleven-year-old son.

¹⁴ In the year 2008 - 480,618 people, 1.5% of the Canadian population have Dementia. By 2038: 1,125,200 will have Dementia in Canada - 2.8% of the Canadian population. The cumulative economic burden will be \$872 billion. Demand for long-term care will increase 10-fold. http://www.alzheimer.ca/~media/Files/national/Advocacy/ASC_Rising_Tide_Full_Report_e.pdf. Accessed March 3, 2015.

On Why Dementia is a Common theme: Nina Silverberg, assistant director of the Alzheimer's Disease Centers Program at the National Institute on Aging, says dementia is more prominent in literature because it's more prominent in life. "Alzheimer's is becoming a more common theme because it simply affects more people and more family members, and that includes novelists," <http://www.nextavenue.org/article/2014-10/4-new-novels-one-theme-dementia>. Accessed March 3, 2015

Turning to fiction for answers is an instinct that I share with other caretakers. [...] It is a disease that uniquely thwarts our ability to comprehend it through traditional modes of investigation. [...] When I consider my own future in a family predisposed to Alzheimer's, I'm left with urgent questions that only fiction can answer: What do those late stages *feel* like? What is it like to lose oneself and still live? Could there be some essential kernel of selfhood that survives until the end? Mid to late-stage sufferers, lost in their aphasia, can't explain it to us. (Block 2014)

My research into Giuliana Bruno's ideas of a feminist reading of space in architecture, film and visual art led me to a deeper understanding of this non-traditional mode of investigation. Bruno describes the kind of communication that is present in this experience:

There is a haptic rule of thumb: when we touch something or someone, we are, inevitably, touched in return. When we look we are not necessarily being looked at. But when we touch, by the very nature of pressing our hand or any part of our body on a subject or object, we cannot escape the contact. Touch is never unidirectional, a one-way street. It always enables an affective return. (*Surface: Matters of Aesthetics, Materiality, and Media* 19)

The challenge now is to interpret that touch and attempt to understand what is present in the moment of that communication.

Conclusion

I have come to the conclusion that concentrating on touch, and other sensory experiences within the process of making this work has lead me to a greater understanding of other ways of knowing. With my mother's Alzheimer's and other forms of aphasia, verbal communication can be limited so new forms of communication and knowing are needed to understand and help those that we care for.

This thesis is a visual description of the communication and observations I experienced within this research of my caregiver position. It is also a visual description of the mourning and emotion present within the moments of this job. In presenting this work I am joining the growing conversation on Alzheimer's and other ways of knowing and communicating when aphasia and cognitive impairment are present.

In paying close attention to the environment my mother and I share, I am aware of my response to sound, touch, taste and visual stimuli. I watch her response to these same stimuli and I try to find a way to understand what she feels in relation to my own response. In a more strict reading of the word haptic, I touch what she touches in order to understand what she feels. As I wrote about earlier, Giuliana Bruno describes the most literal meaning of the word haptic as it speaks to touch when touching another being.

It was though my feminist position and the autoethnographic investigation of my methodology that encouraged this rich exploration of the personal and my emotions in caring for my family. I have been a painter for 25 years and so I began the process of this investigation with painting. My theoretical research led me to use, as my medium, photography and video.

This switch in medium was a revelation in my studio practice that allowed me the freedom to work in tandem with the sporadic nature of my caregiver duties. In my thesis I discuss Kristeva and Pollock's claim that Hannah Arendt and Mary Cassatt used the restrictions in their lives as a catalysts to explore the personal in their work. These readings confirmed my choice to explore interpersonal relationships and the world that I have access to: the perspective of a caregiver and the experience of living with Alzheimer's. It was necessary to adapt my studio practice to explore the intricacies of this life fully. Painting is slow solitary work. Photography, the way I use it, is a mobile and a socially connected practice.

Photography is also more amenable to multiple images being produced. In my readings of Irigaray and Cixous I became interested in the feminist perspective that speaks to writing from a new language and a multiplicity of views. Exploring the senses and using multiple photographs that interact with each other to make a multiplicity of meanings is my answer to Irigaray and Cixous' call. This medium of photography also allows for a great amount of experimentation in camera in order to experiment with visualizing the haptic experience. The portable camera came with me everywhere to explore the minutiae of my everyday routines as a caregiver.

Kathleen Stewart's poetic description of the internal dialogue that we all experience in our day-to-day lives is also key to what my installation of multiple images expresses. In *Ordinary Affects* she describes our meandering thoughts and our presence of mind waxing and waning in clarity. Her written description is a perfect complement to my visual method of describing the everyday experience of my life as a caregiver.

In its broadest sense this installation is a visual narrative of the domestic sphere. It is a view to a year in my life as a caregiver as seen through the lens of divorce, mourning and Alzheimer's.

Potential Direction For Future Work

Opening up to media other than paint has been liberating and productive for me. The speed with which photography can be produced and the mobile nature of the medium is a perfect fit for my sporadic schedule. The relief of being liberated from the four walls of a studio is palpable to me. Photography is something I will continue, although I will never totally neglect painting. It is a challenge that I would miss too much to give up.

When I started this degree I was determined to find a way to investigate my view of the present day. I was pulled on many different paths along the way and in the end I managed to come back to my goal. In this process I have come to embrace the investigation of the banal yet emotionally charged routines of my job as caregiver and the environments and objects that accompany those routines. It is rich territory that is both personally important and functions well with the feminist underpinning of my work. I am curious to see how I will continue to tackle this subject using multiple media.

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Figure 1. *Everything In Slow Motion*. A detail of one photograph from the larger installation.



Figure 2. *Everything In Slow Motion*. A detail of three photographs from the larger installation.



Figure 3. *Everything In Slow Motion*. Installation view of photographs.



Figure 4. Video installation: *Repeated Attempts At Connection: A Staring Contest In Three Parts*. Two seven minute long video projections sit across the room from each other in a staring contest.

