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C Magazine is indexed, abstracted, and available electronically through products and services provided by the Alternative Press Index (API) altpress.org, ProQuest LLC proquest.com, EBSCO Information Services ebSCOhost.com, and Gale Cengage Learning gale.cengage.com.

ISSN 1480-5472 (print)
ISSN 1923-3795 (online)

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C Magazine is published three times per year in April (Spring), August (Autumn), and December (Winter) by C The Visual Arts Foundation, a non-profit corporation, charitable no. 88643 1162.

We acknowledge funding support from the Ontario Arts Council, an agency of the Government of Ontario, the support of the Government of Canada, and the Canada Council for the Arts.

Funded by the
Government
of Canada

Canada



Canada Council
for the Arts

Conseil des Arts
du Canada



ONTARIO ARTS COUNCIL
CONSEIL DES ARTS DE L'ONTARIO
an Ontario government agency
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Where Does it Hurt?
Artspeak, Vancouver
June 7 – July 26, 2014
 by Sydney Hart

The word “curator,” philosopher Boris Groys reminds us, shares with the word “cure” an etymological origin in the Latin verb *curare*, meaning “take care of.” Bridging these disparate terms, Groys proposes a bold form of care that frames the relation between iconography and its public presentation: “Curating is curing. The process of curating cures the image’s powerlessness, its incapacity to present itself [...] The medicine that makes the sick image appear healthy – makes the image literally appear, and do so in the best light – is the exhibition.”¹ Groys thereby suggests that the curator’s agency – negotiating the limits of exhibition space and public – provides a visibility necessary to resolve a kind of existential void that would otherwise leave artworks forlorn. Setting aside the problematic essentialization of relations here between curatorial activity and art, it is worth considering the parallels between the institutional selection, sanctioning and presentation that brings cultural forms into public view, and the social acknowledgement and management of illness in therapeutic processes.

With divergent entry points into this relationship, the exhibition *Where Does it Hurt?* at Artspeak frames different intersections between art and therapy. Without directly addressing the practice of art therapy, or foregrounding a Romantic understanding of art as sublimated, cathartic release, *Where Does it Hurt?* instead playfully and critically examines relations between healing processes and artistic production. Exhibition curator Jonah Gray has supported a relative balance in visual media, with artists’ work encompassing painting, installation, video and printed matter. However, a significant formal feature remains consistent: each artist has appropriated or incorporated distinctly institutional non-art elements into his or her work, creating different tensions between autonomous artistic expression and the practical influences of therapy.

The first room upon entering the gallery presents artworks that engage with traditions in painting, while addressing and extending the long history of automatism as a pathway to the unconscious. David MacWilliam’s work centres on a well-known psychological tool: Hermann Rorschach’s Psychodiagnostik inkblot tests. For *Inkblot 031* (2013), MacWilliam has translated one of his own inkblot creations into a large tapestry that hangs in the middle of the gallery. Produced through the mechanical process of a Jacquard loom, it intensifies the automatism of the traditional inkblot method, while suggesting another practical value. Using painting in a seemingly more casual way, Rachele Sawatsky’s works include *The Apple and the Doctor* (2012), a series of eight found pages of letterhead from corporate psychiatry and psychotherapy practices, painted with

Krista Belle Stewart, *Seraphine: Her Own Story, Told by Seraphine Stewart, September 20, 2013, 2014*, digital video

PHOTO: BLAINE CAMPBELL; COURTESY OF THE TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION COMMISSION OF CANADA (TRC), FILE NUMBER: 2011522.



1 Boris Groys, *Art Power* (Cambridge, Mass.; London: MIT Press, 2013), 46. Referenced in Jonah Gray, "Where Does it Hurt?" (Artspeak pamphlet, 2014).

naive egg tempera forms, as if in the shadow of appointments. The folding of symbols of psychoanalysis, present in both artists' works, references the historical precedents of automatism as used to further experimentations in abstraction (from Joan Miró to les Automatistes), while nonetheless shoring up Modernist perceptions of art as the expression of the artist's psychological interiority.

Visible from the street, a large print depicting the self-help bestseller *How to Stop Worrying and Start Living* appears against Artspeak's front window. Presented as if to invite passersby to take up the guide's invitation to expunge stress and anxiety, the image's black and white tones and dated aesthetic, on the contrary, undercut the book's promise. This artwork sets the tone for Cathy Busby's other, more expansive work, *Self-Help Library* (1994, 1996, 2014), a collection of self-help books introduced as interventions to the gallery space, with shelves directly embedded in the central gallery wall, and the books open to direct consultation. The artwork thus acts as both an accessible resource library (taken literally) and a kind of sociological inventory of disorders with suggested treatments, narratives of pain and personal reinvention (taken figuratively) from a 20th century, mostly anglophonic context. Reading between the lines, the paradox highlighted by Busby's clinical and archival organization is that the purported solutions to personal distress can themselves be symptomatic of wider cultural failings, here illustrated either through the values guiding prescribed solutions (as suggested by the title *Winning Through Intimidation*) or the slightness of the tomes, promising to cut through complex illnesses with convenient paths to self-reinvention. Busby's work neutralizes the books' original function through their presentation as an installation, but if the library-as-artwork can be said to be functional in any way – including therapeutically – it is only in its critical capacity to reveal the limits of a culture that values individualized well-being through the ease of an impersonal and commodified management.

Also addressing personal and collective healing, although through a single biography, is Krista Belle Stewart's work. Two digital videos show contrasting

portrayals of the artist's mother, Seraphine Stewart, the first Aboriginal public health nurse in British Columbia. The installation is arranged so that the viewer, having to stand between the two facing video projections, sees them playing alternately. On one side is an old black and white docu-drama produced by the CBC, *Seraphine: Her Own Story, Told by Seraphine Ned*, September 17, 1967 (2014). This is a scripted work, presenting the protagonist through her experiences at nursing school, following her solitary movements amidst the bustle of school, and using dialogue that emphasizes tensions between her attachment to her home, and the possibilities offered elsewhere by her studies. On the opposite wall is a colour video interview, *Seraphine: Her Own Story, Told by Seraphine Stewart*, September 20, 2013 (2014), composed of excerpts from Stewart's testimony for the government mandated Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The protagonist, now decades later, speaks about her experiences attending an Indian Residential School in Kamloops, BC. Occasionally leading the conversation with the interviewer, the elder Stewart seems to speak freely about her memories as a child, recalling experiences of neglect and deprivation caused by the residential school, where a genocidal ideology manifested itself through separation from her family, the rupturing of her cultural heritage and her reduction to being called a number by school officials. By framing a dialogue between these video documents, the artist foregrounds relations between personal memory and the historical reconstructions of the documentary form, and between the invisibility of personal care and the prominence of collective healing processes, which propels the viewer to extend a nuanced understanding of memory and its representations into the present.

The potential of media to bring illness into public view and, in the process inconspicuously carry underlying cultural values, comes into sharp focus with the installations of the last two artists. All four artists, however, index formal aspects of their artworks to cultural forms of therapy, so that *Where Does it Hurt?* stages a peculiar kind of ontology, where artworks negotiate tensions between personal expression, and the civilizing influences that both heal and pathologize.

Sydney Hart is an artist and writer based in Vancouver.