

Family Photography and the Documentation of Trauma in Contemporary Art

"The places we have known do not belong solely to the world of space in which we situate them for our greater convenience. They were only a thin slice among contiguous impressions which formed our life at that time; the memory of a certain image is but regret for a certain moment; and houses, roads, avenues are as fleeting, alas, as the years."

—Marcel Proust, *Swann's Way*

English photographer Richard Billingham and Canadian photographer and filmmaker Jaret Belliveau produce unconventional photographs to investigate family dynamics. The artists are part of a broader movement in contemporary art photography aimed at representing everyday lived experience that include candid documentation of tragedy and loss. In 1996, Billingham published photographs of his father's chronic alcoholism and his family's debilitating poverty in the poignant and politically charged photo book *Ray's a Laugh* to much critical acclaim. Over a decade later, Belliveau exhibited a body of work titled *Dominion Street* at Gallery TPW in Toronto in 2010. The exhibition featured old family photographs, sculptural objects, and a narrative series of pictures representing his mother in the years leading up to her cancer diagnosis, her ensuing medical treatment, and subsequent passing. By making their private lives a public display through art exhibitions and book publications, Billingham and Belliveau use their family's trauma as a meaningful source of subject matter. In this regard, these artists are in the contradictory position that many autobiographical photographers encounter: they experience trauma while recording the traumatic experiences of others. However, as literary theorist Leo Bersani makes clear, it is important that audiences do not reduce trauma to points of aesthetic

concern.¹ To do so suggests a troubling lack of empathy and marginalizes the real life suffering that undercuts their photographs. Instead, their work allows audiences to reflect upon the possibilities, limitations, and ethics of framing family trauma as art photography.

Billingham and Belliveau's work also allows audiences to conceptualize how trauma-related art operates on audiences through affect. The term affect is derived from the Latin *affectus* or *adfectus*, which, roughly translated to English, means passion or emotion. However, Jill Bennett describes affect as an embodied sensation, "a process of seeing feeling where feeling is both imagined and regenerated through an encounter with the artwork."² For Teresa Brennan, affect is an energetic dimension and social phenomenon that is largely physiological in origin. In her definition, affect is interactive, intercommunicative and interpersonal; in other words, little differentiation exists between an individual and their environment.³ Benedict de Spinoza also connects affect to the emotions and passions that preside over human beings. He maintains that individuals negotiate emotions and passions using ethical judgements and reasoning in order to achieve freedom, survival, and happiness in their daily lives.⁴ Each of these examples help to illustrate that affect is fundamentally relational, radically subjective, and associated with bodily sensations.

By exploring photography that represents family-related tragedy and loss, I consider the ways that trauma and affect work on the photographer and the audience. For the photographer, taking photographs of family trauma is bound up in experiencing suffering and loss as a member of that family. How does the photographer negotiate between the dual roles of family member

¹ Leo Bersani as quoted in Jill Bennett, *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 4-5.

² Bennett, *Empathic Vision*, 41.

³ Teresa Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect* (Cornell: Cornell University Press), 3.

⁴ Stuart Hampshire provides a synopsis of Spinoza's main arguments in his introduction to *The Ethics*. See: Benedict de Spinoza, *The Ethics*, ed. and trans. Edwin Curley, intro. Stuart Hampshire (New York: Penguin, 1996), xi.

and photographer in a way that remains creatively beneficial, critical, and ethically responsible? For the audience, how does the site of the encounter with traumatic imagery operate? Do responses change when looking at a book publication compared to an exhibition setting? Because Billingham and Belliveau record everyday traumatic events that some viewers might have experienced or can identify with, how does this change their reading of the work?

Through my analysis of trauma, affect, and the ethics of exhibiting trauma-related art, I consider how viewers relate to images of suffering, what kinds of responses may be produced, and what can be gained from these encounters. I am particularly concerned with the rhizomatic field of relations enacted between audiences and artwork. Because everyday, structural trauma is inclusive and recognizable throughout society, I argue that affective responses to artwork representing trauma can offer new ways of bridging cultural differences that may limit our understanding of each other. Thus, artwork that engages affect connects individuals and groups while producing new social relationships.

Richard Billingham and *Ray's a Laugh*

The photographs in *Ray's a Laugh* were captured during a dramatic shift in the British manufacturing industry. Taking cues from Reaganism, the Neoliberal administrations of Margaret Thatcher and John Major intensified the disassembly of the welfare state and mass de-industrialization. In effect, the onus of social responsibility was placed back onto the individual citizen. During a 1987 interview Thatcher affirmed, "I think we've been through a period where too many people have been given to understand that if they have a problem, it's the government's

job to cope with it.”⁵ Those who lost their jobs, or could not find any, other than in the booming and low-paying service sector, were forced to live off a modest dole and faced losing financial security, gainful employment, and self-dignity in the process. Neoliberalism, popularly known as the “Third Way,” essentially amputated the hands of government from the free market economy, which produced devastating effects to Britain’s lower and (formerly) middle-class citizens. With *Ray’s a Laugh* Richard Billingham traces this devastating transition—the photo book exposes the pervasive failure of deindustrialization and social welfare reforms in Britain while representing a nostalgic call for working-class security.

Building on a British preoccupation with photographing the lower classes, undertaken in contemporary art by artists such as Nick Waplington and Martin Parr, Billingham documented his family in their Midlands council flat from 1990 to 1996. A cunning take on the BBC television comedy series with the same name, *Ray’s a Laugh* was published as a photo book in 1996, just two years after he received his undergraduate degree from the University of Sunderland.

The majority of Billingham’s photographs were taken on a common Instamatic camera using built-in flash and inexpensive film developed at a local chemist. The photographs were not intended for publication or even exhibition because they were originally used as source material for large-scale figurative paintings. After their discovery by a visiting professor to Billingham’s undergraduate studio, the photographs were heralded as extraordinary works on their own accord. Less than a year after *Ray’s a Laugh* went to print, Billingham’s national and international popularity soared when Charles Saatchi exhibited several of his photographs in the

⁵ Margaret Thatcher as quoted in “Epitaph for the Eighties: ‘there is no such thing as society,’” *Women’s Own Magazine*, 31 October, 1987. Available at <http://briandeer.com/social/thatcher-society.htm>

seminal 1997 exhibition “*Sensation*” alongside works by other notable young British artists (yBa’s) such as Tracey Emin, Mat Collishaw, and Sam Taylor-Wood.

In *Sensation* Billingham’s pictures were blown-up to 120 x 80 cm in scale, but when some of the same works were scaled down to book size and published in *Ray’s a Laugh*, they underwent an extraordinary shift in meaning, context, and viewing conditions. The experience of observing, analyzing, flipping through, and mulling over images in a photo book may be more appropriate and responsible than seeing the same images in an art gallery or museum because the book imitates the setting and atmosphere of encountering conventional family photo albums. Susan Sontag is similarly concerned with the viewing conditions of photographs in books as compared to art galleries or museums. For Sontag, “up to a point, the weight and seriousness of [images of pain] survive better in a book, where one can look privately, linger over pictures, without talking.”⁶ *Ray’s a Laugh*, as a photo book, may produce stronger affect in audiences because they are given the opportunity to negotiate the Billingham family’s pseudo-album on their own time, in their own space, in silence, and without the fear of others noticing their responses. That being said, viewing the work under the same conditions as other family photo albums may also serve to highlight the beauty of the work and its overwhelming break from the vernacular tradition. Sontag also reminds us that books can just as easily be closed and put away as images can be walked away from in an art gallery or museum, and the affect audiences may encounter is as fleeting as our time spent looking at the images.⁷ As an art book masquerading as a family photo album, or vice versa, *Ray’s a Laugh* may rest quietly on coffee tables, wound upon opening, only to be quieted again with its closure; and although the book may close it does not mean that the pain it represents has ended, nor does it imply that the empathy felt towards its

⁶ Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador, 2003), 121.

⁷ Ibid.

subject(s) must desist. While, as Lisa Cartwright suggests, “like an identification card, empathy can expire,”⁸ the knowledge and meaning gained from empathic experience may continue to exist long after the initial feelings associated with empathy have subsided. Perhaps empathy should extend beyond the physical encounters with the artwork itself and act on the spectator later on, when powerful emotions can make way for critical thought. This distancing may allow audiences to develop a deeper intellectual engagement with the work while also enabling them to interpret their empathy—why it was registered, how it functioned, and for whom was it felt for.

From Ralph Rugoff to Julian Stallabrass, Billingham’s work finds praise by art critics for its aesthetic qualities, but it has also been reproached for the way it portrays the artist’s family. Billingham’s pictures, for the most part, represent a poverty-stricken lower class family to some middle and upper-class audiences and critics who make strong moral judgements on the work and thus the family itself. Characterizing Billingham’s family as a lower-class “human catastrophe,” art critic Outi Remes suggests that *Ray’s a Laugh* “reveals our curiosity in poverty.”⁹ As most of his family were unemployed while the series was being documented, art critic Tim Adams finds the Billingham family “endlessly time-killing” and the artist himself as a “profound chronicler of time wasted.” His libellous evaluation of the family’s work ethic and behaviour goes so far as to insult them with the title of his article: “From my family...to other animals.”¹⁰ The connotation is rather obvious here. Finally, Stallabrass appears to suggest that *Ray’s a Laugh* is a lower-class intrusion into the elitist sphere of high art: “with the prints, the

⁸ Lisa Cartwright, *Moral Spectatorship: Technologies of Voice and Affect in Postwar Representation of the Child*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 235.

⁹ Outi Remes, “Reinterpreting Family Photographs: Returning to Richard Billingham’s “Ray’s a Laugh” Series,” *Afterimage* (May-June, 2007). [<http://www.entrepreneur.com/tradejournals/article/165167343.html>] Accessed 1 March, 2011.

¹⁰ Tim Adams, “From my family...to other animals,” *The Observer* (Sunday, April 8, 2007). [<http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2007/apr/08/photography.features>] Accessed 1 March, 2011.

lurid patterning, decorative knick-knacks, tattoos, filth and general disorder of his parents and their home are brought into contrast with the minimal space of the gallery.” Stallabrass also relates an anecdote to his readers where someone described *Ray’s a Laugh* to him as “middle-class porn;”¹¹ “porn” in the sense that a middle and upper-class audiences may find voyeuristic pleasure in looking at images of poverty, physical violence, and suffering amongst the lower-class. As some of the critical reception has shown, Billingham’s work provides some critics and audiences with an opportunity to reinforce social stereotypes and denigrate the lower classes. It also serves to reinforce the non-empathic political philosophy that Thatcher exercised during her administration’s time in power during the late 1970s to the early 1990s. Crude forms of non-empathy such as these generate disaffection, which makes reaching out to others over class, geographic, and ethnic lines difficult, if not impossible.

Billingham discusses his photographs in terms of their aesthetic merit and seems to expect his viewers to contemplate the rich formal properties and beauty of the work as well. In a way, this circumvents the family dramas that they so explicitly represent.¹² Speaking on the public reaction to *Ray’s a Laugh*, Billingham explains that the work:

caught the general public’s eye because they were looking at the subject matter...I thought everybody could read photographs, but they can’t...It was ‘Oh, look at those stains on the wall, look at his mum’s tattoos...’ and I never saw none of that, honestly,

¹¹ Julian Stallabrass, *High art lite: British art in the 1990s* (London and New York: Verso, 1999), 251.

¹² Stallabrass makes reference to Billingham’s interest in the aesthetic properties of his photographs over its dramatic subject matter: “Billingham expects that the viewer will respond to these pictures as vehicles for the aesthetic.” See: Stallabrass, *High art lite*, 252.

that just happened to be there. People weren't seeing the beauty underneath, none of the composition, none of the pattern.¹³

Although Billingham desires that audiences appreciate his technical and compositional aptitude, as Sontag effectively reminds us, a “photographer's intentions do not determine the meaning of the photograph,”¹⁴ and more to the point, his subject matter powerfully unsettles most attempts at pure aesthetic contemplation (figs. 1). While the artist may be acquainted with his subject matter, in both a literal and figurative sense, many viewers may not share his same familiarity.



Figure. 1. Richard Billingham, *Untitled*, from *Ray's a Laugh*, 1995.

The Billingham family responds to *Ray's a Laugh* in a similar way to the artist: by rigidly avoiding the misery and suffering that it so powerfully represents. Speaking on behalf of his mother and the rest of his family, Billingham says:

¹³ Richard Billingham as quoted in “Richard Billingham: It’s all in the eye of the beholder,” *The Independent*, Tuesday, 5 June 2001. [<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/profiles/richard-billingham-its-all-in-the-eye-of-the-beholder-672842.html>] Accessed 1 March, 2011.

¹⁴ Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 39.

My Mum will be looking at the book and if she hasn't got full concentration on it she will say, 'Pass me a fag, Ray.' They relate to the work but I don't think they recognize the media interest in it, or the importance. I don't think that they think anything of it, really. They are not shocked by it, or anything. We're used to living in poverty.¹⁵

Consequently, the audience's narrow focus on particular themes and objects instead of on the Billingham family's suffering might emerge from a struggle to identify with them, which alludes to the larger issue of class discrepancy between the family and the audience. *Ray's a Laugh* also illustrates how class may condition the production of empathy in viewers. By concentrating on the stereotypical signifiers of lower class homes and individuals, such as untidiness and tattoos, some audiences may avoid empathy simply through their preoccupation with the differences¹⁶ between themselves and the Billingham family. This suggests that class may condition how audiences see trauma-related artwork.

To encounter artwork that represents suffering and loss in a responsible and critical manner, viewers might adopt a way of thinking that Bennett refers to as "empathic vision," a mode of seeing and feeling that places empathy at the centre of responses to traumatic imagery.¹⁷ As an ethical and political form of spectatorship, empathic vision involves feeling for another while simultaneously becoming aware of one's own position as a witness. Cartwright is similarly concerned with reining in empathy as an ethical response by concentrating on the moral significance of feeling *for* rather than feeling *like* the other. She shifts the traditional understanding of identification to make room for a mode of identification that involves empathy,

¹⁵ Saatchi Gallery Online, "Selected works by Richard Billingham," [http://www.saatchi-gallery.co.uk/artists/Richard_billingham_resources.htm]. Accessed 2 April, 2011.

¹⁶ Sarah Bassnett, "Archive and Affect in Contemporary Photography," *Photography and Culture*, Vol. 2, Iss. 1 (November, 2009), 244.

¹⁷ Bennett, *Empathic Vision*, 1-21.

which she calls “empathic identification.” Yet she is careful to keep her understanding of identification in check so that it does not compromise the singular position of the other:

In the model of empathic spectatorship, we may downplay the factor of knowledge in the experience “I know how you feel” and analyze the nature and experience of that projective relationship in which I am myself “made to feel” and subsequently act “on your behalf.” Importantly, you may not reproduce in me the same feelings that I witness in you.¹⁸

Empathic identification references the viewer’s recognition of the visible facial movements and bodily gestures that signify the affect in another person. Audiences can learn how to respond to the behaviour, action, or event experienced by the subject by reading affect with cognitive reasoning and moral judgement. Thus, to identify with Billingham’s work may not necessarily mean being able to identify with his family’s lived experiences, but with the movements, gestures, and expressions that signify their trauma. As Cartwright hopes, this process of identification, that confirms the presence of pain and suffering, can lead to strong feelings of empathy. This conceptual approach to empathy demonstrates the ethical importance of maintaining the subject distinction between “you” and “I.”

While Bennett and Cartwright suggest that empathy is based on the acknowledgment and differentiation of “you” / “I,” they and others such as Dominick LaCapra, Geoffrey Hartman, and Kaja Silverman warn against “overidentification,” specifically with primary victims of trauma. In effect, overidentification is an ethically precarious response that viewers may encounter when they attempt to imagine themselves *in* the place of the victim of trauma, to feel *like* them, and to draw *comparisons* between their suffering and one’s own. Thus, overidentification with

¹⁸ Cartwright, *Moral Spectatorship*, 24.

Billingham and his family may actually reveal a fundamental lack of empathy. For Cartwright, “to possess, to enter, to inhabit, to control, to animate, or to touch the other is, crucially and firmly, not to (want to) know or to be the other.”¹⁹ Cartwright’s conceptualization of distancing the “you” / “I” duality is useful because it provides an example of where empathy can go too far, to a place where it is no longer empathy but symbolizes something else entirely. Bennett’s concept of empathic vision and Cartwright’s concept empathic identification call for understanding and compassion of the people through affect, and the realization that even though one may be familiar with the events of another individual or group, that the person’s experience of affect is unique to them alone. That being said, as Sarah Bassnett suggests, “an affective response can be particularly important in relation to issues that are difficult to grasp and links that are not easily forged.”²⁰ For audiences unaccustomed to living in or seeing images of poverty, Billingham’s work may forge meaningful connections over class lines through affect and empathy, thus helping audiences to understand people who they may not easily relate to or readily encounter.

Jaret Belliveau and *Dominion Street*

Jaret Belliveau’s series *Dominion Street* (2003-2008) began as a visual investigation into family dynamics and the hegemonic balances of power that govern it. Ten months into his project, Belliveau’s mother, an Anglican minister, was diagnosed with stomach cancer, which then metastasized and spread throughout her body. Since Belliveau is an emerging Canadian photographer the critical discourse around his work is limited, but those that have discussed the work often place it in the tradition of cancer and HIV / AIDS photo-documentation. For

¹⁹ Ibid., 25-26.

²⁰ Bassnett, “Archive and Affect in Contemporary Photography,” 244.

example, art critic Daniel Baird finds Belliveau's work as continuing photography's preoccupation with dying and death: Nan Goldin's representations of AIDS victims, Richard Avedon's portraits of his dying father, and Annie Leibovitz's unsettling pictures of Susan Sontag living with cancer. Belliveau and the aforementioned photographers, says Baird, demonstrate that disease and mortality are essentially conditions of human life.²¹ Victoria Handysides is similarly concerned with Belliveau's exploration of cancer and death by insisting that the artist's work "began as an innocent look at the identity of a contemporary family but ended with a candid view into illness, loss, and mourning."²² Likewise, Eleni Deacon correctly describes Belliveau's work as a touching compilation of photographs that communicate troubling moments in family life usually excluded from conventional family photo albums.²³ What becomes clear from Belliveau's work is that it shares a unique connection to Billingham's *Ray's a Laugh*, mainly because it documents private family moments, makes use of suffering as subject matter, and maintains a strong conceptual relationship to family photo albums.

In a body of work that has been exhibited in different arrangements over several years, *Dominion Street* was exhibited at Toronto's Gallery TPW in 2010 under the same name.²⁴ There, Belliveau included photographs that had not been exhibited before, in addition to old family photographs and objects that functioned like autonomous sculptures, such as his younger

²¹ Daniel Baird, "Family Albums," exhibition essay (Toronto: Gallery TPW, 2010), 3.

²² Victoria Handysides, "On Dominion Street: Photographer offers candid look at life and death," *HERE*, 15 July, 2010 [<http://herenb.canadaeast.com/news/article/1135668>] Accessed 24 February, 2011.

²³ Eleni Deacon, "Jaret Belliveau's Family Photographs," *Torontoist*, 10 February, 2010 [http://torontoist.com/2010/02/family_portraits.php] Accessed 15 April, 2011.

²⁴ For my review of this exhibition, see: "Documentary Photography and the Family Frame: Jaret Belliveau's *Dominion Street*," *FUSE Magazine*, Vol. 33, No. 3 (Summer, 2010), 42-43. Since 2010, the strongest showing of *Dominion Street* took place at the Beaverbrook Gallery in Fredericton, New Brunswick, in 2012. Photographs from the series were also displayed at the exhibition "Some Things Last a Long Time" curated by the author at the McIntosh Gallery in 2012.

brother's battered red leather jacket, which hung on the wall by a single nail (fig. 2). By presenting his colour photographs alongside mostly anonymous black-and-white family



Figure. 2. *Dominion Street*, installation photograph, Gallery TPW, Toronto, 2010. Image courtesy of the artist.

photographs from the distant past, Belliveau traces a loose narrative that chronologically archives his family's nearly century-old visual history. But not only does *Dominion Street* function as a genealogy of his family's lived experiences, it also operates as a catalyst for personal memory as well. For the artist, this body of work is fundamentally about his family, specifically his mother, yet it also speaks to the audience's family as well. Commenting on the interpersonal viewing relationship that exists in *Dominion Street*, Belliveau says:

You're not looking at someone die at a rebel uprising or of starvation - you're looking intimately at your neighbour. I think that's why it evokes emotion in people...

Obviously, people have relative experience... photography, as we know, isn't about the

picture - it's what you bring to the picture. People don't even see my mother. They see their mother or father.²⁵

Belliveau's photographs allow audiences to reflect upon their own experiences with cancer and other people who may have been directly affected by it—mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters, friends and relatives. Here, affect can be produced through memories of those who suffered and memories of the dead. Bennett proposes that there are two forms of memory related to affect: ordinary memory and sense memory. In her definition, ordinary memory is connected to cognitive thought and words—"the realm in which events are rendered intelligible, pegged to a common or established frame of reference, so that they can be communicated to, and readily understood by, a general audience." On the other hand, she describes sense memory as a type of "affective memory"; "unspeakable" and "nameless," it exists outside of memory proper.²⁶

Bennett's notion of sense memory allows audiences to conceptualize how particular engagements with memory can be felt with the body rather than through verbal communication. With Belliveau's work, though, affect may be the result of a touching memory that overwhelms the body as well as the faculties of language.

Upon learning of his mother's illness, Belliveau sought her approval and permission to keep taking her photograph while she underwent intense chemotherapy treatment. During a revealing e-mail correspondence with the author, Belliveau clarifies just how this exchange proceeded:

My mother and I had one specific conversation about photographing her when she was ill. It took place in the hospital during the first week of her treatment. I was sitting in her

²⁵ Jaret Belliveau as quoted in Handysides, "On Dominion Street."

²⁶ Bennett, *Emphatic Vision*, 25-34.

room with my camera and she asked me what I wanted to do and I explained to her that I thought we had an opportunity to make [artwork] together that would show her battle with cancer and her recovery. She agreed that this was a good idea. We also discussed the fact that I was going to have to show just not the positive moments and that I was aiming to represent many sides of her struggle.²⁷

On this occasion, Belliveau's mother considered her illness as a narrative possibility, where photographs could document her "story" and encompass a beginning (diagnosis), middle (treatment), and end (cure). However, it is unclear as to whether her consent included the exhibition of the photographs in an art gallery or museum setting: "my mother and I didn't discuss [the] manner the photographs would be displayed or what the actual end product would be but she did know I wanted to make a book of the whole story, which would include images from when she was healthy and sick and her recovery."²⁸ At this point questions arise concerning the subject's intentions, the creative licence of the artist and the appropriate venues for presenting trauma-related art. Has the artist not met his mother's expectations by displaying photographs of her in an art gallery rather than an art book? Is the artist sanctioned, by the power endowed to the artist, to take certain liberties concerning the circulation and exhibition of their work? How does this change when the artist is also the son or daughter of their subject? Should some images be confined to books so that the gravity of their subject matter does not diminish? *Dominion Street* powerfully illustrates the problems associated with representing the dying, the limitations of voyeurism, and the complicated ethical responsibility of the photographer / family member. Even if audiences are not aware of her intentions for the series, the images communicate her state of unconsciousness, thus we as viewers can recognize her

²⁷ Belliveau, e-mail correspondence with the author, 8 May, 2011.

²⁸ Ibid.

inability to direct or control the way she is re / presented. Capturing images of people who have fully lost their agency is an ethical crisis, one that arrives at further scrutiny when the photographer is also a family member.

As the *Dominion Street* series documents illness, Belliveau's practice at this time can be considered a form of autopathography, which typically references literary autobiographies of illness, but whose meaning has been expanded by art theorists such as Tamar Tembeck.²⁹ Several decades before *Dominion Street*, the American feminist artist Hannah Wilke created her own autopathographic series of photographs called *So Help Me Hannah* (1978-81) to explore her troubled relationship with her mother's breast cancer treatment. As Tembeck explains, Wilke's use of autopathography as an aesthetic instrument engages rhetorical devices that trigger affective responses while forcing viewers to be torn between reactions of empathy and non-empathy.³⁰ This is a crucial point because autopathographic photography not only necessitates affective engagement, but also questions the ethical responses of viewers who bear witness to trauma. For Tembeck, it seems irresponsible for viewers to dismiss the idea that they are looking at artwork that represents an individual in pain and possibly nearing death—autopathography “asks the viewer to bear witness to a fellow human being's experience: an experience that ultimately mirrors or foreshadows that of the viewer.” In other words, autopathographic images operate as *memento mori*, a reminder of death.³¹ An appropriate response identifies that, in the act of viewing autopathography, the viewer most likely exists as a healthy body, and, as such, resides in a position of bodily privilege. As a result, affect and empathy may emerge from the

²⁹ Tamar Tembeck expands upon the literary-based notion of autopathography in her treatment of the cancer-based photographic work of Hannah Wilke. See: “Exposed Wounds: The Photographic Autopathographies of Hannah Wilke and Jo Spence,” *Canadian Art Review*, XXXIII, 1-2 (2008): 87-101.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 87.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 99.

realization that another's death may (and will) eventually mirror their own. In contrast, responses of non-empathy may surface from the destructive social stigmas and metaphors attached to particular illnesses such as cancer, AIDS, and tuberculosis, which theorists such as Sontag vehemently attack. In her book *Illness as Metaphor*, Sontag maintains that society perceives cancer as an "invasive" "enemy" which the patient responds to by setting up "defences" like chemotherapy in preparation of all-out "war."³² By challenging the metaphorical relationships constructed between cancer and its sufferers by doctors, therapists, and others, Sontag hopes to drain cancer of its evil connotations by advancing the truth behind what it really is: an illness. Non-empathy can also exist well beyond the attitudes and stereotypes that serve to limit affect. At work here are radically subjective encounters that can produce negative affect including fear, disgust, and shame³³ at the sight of sick or diseased bodies. Negative affect serves to impede empathic responses by negating the idea of feeling for, and characterize an ethically problematic emotional distancing between the viewer and the sufferer.

In *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, Roland Barthes investigates the reception of photographs in relation to cultural codes, phenomenology, and his own autobiography. The first of these is the *studium*, which describes things that most of us can readily identify or understand at once in a photograph from our pool of cultural knowledge. Second, the *punctum*, a Latin word derived from the Greek for 'wound,' is the purely subjective and emotionally touching detail in a photograph. Like the effects of trauma itself, the *punctum* is difficult to communicate through symbolic language to the extent of escaping it, and holds the

³² "The controlling metaphors in descriptions of cancer are, in fact, drawn not from economics but from the language of warfare: every physician and every attentive patient is familiar with, if perhaps inured to, this military terminology." See: Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor* (New York: Picador, 1977), 64-67.

³³ See: *Shame and its Sisters: A Silvan Tomkins Reader*, edited by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995).

capacity to, as Barthes maintains, distress the viewer. Experienced as a bodily affect, the *punctum* wounds, pricks, bruises, cuts, stings or punctures in some way. Relating his personal experience of the *punctum* to the reader in *Camera Lucida*, Barthes describes it as:

a detail [that] overwhelms the entirety of my reading; it is an intense mutation of my interest, a fulguration. By the mark of *something*, the photograph is no longer “anything whatever.” This *something* has triggered me, has provoked a tiny shock, a *satori*, the passage of a void.³⁴

Barthes’s conceptualization of the *punctum* informs trauma’s radical subjectivity, how it can be transacted to audiences, and warns of the potential somatic hazards of studying certain photographs. Not only can the *punctum* produce an intense affect, it may also characterize what Brian Massumi calls “a shock to thought;”³⁵ in other words, it may act as a catalyst for sustained cognitive analysis. During his mother’s chemotherapy treatment and up until the time of her passing, Belliveau photographed his mother as a way to “make sense” of her illness meaning that he drew knowledge from suffering as a way to manage his trauma. Thus, affect, like the *punctum*, may reveal how trauma produces knowledge for those who bear witness while demonstrating the transformative potential of the photograph.

Barthes describes photographs as being temporally conditioned to signify ‘*that-has-been*’ and, accordingly, we are obliged to accept that what we see in the photograph is a vestige of history.³⁶ While looking through old family photographs of his mother shortly after her death, Barthes stumbled upon a photograph which he named titled *Winter Garden Photograph* and

³⁴ Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 42-49.

³⁵ Brian Massumi as quoted in Bennett, *Emphatic Vision*, 11.

³⁶ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 96.

located his *punctum* in the way his mother, as a young child, holds her finger in her other hand. This simple gesture strikes Barthes in a strange way because it symbolizes her innocence and harmless temperament. The *Winter Garden Photograph* also made Barthes aware that photographs were much more than indexical passages of time; they were tormenting signifiers of life and death. Like Barthes decades earlier, after his mother's own passing, Belliveau negotiates his relationship to his mother while looking at photographs of her:

I still think I see my mother in crowds and or driving in a car that passes. That is where the photographs become a reminder of the reality I now live in. A little more alone and disarmed. The whole experience of photographing seems like a dream until I look and absorb my work then the concrete truth hits me again and again. As the camera was a place I could go through my mother's treatment, a type of visual sanctuary where I could respond to her pain and capture her struggle, now the photograph[s] are the proof. The undeniable reference to that time and that experience.³⁷

Engaging with the photographs of his mother shortly after her death reminds Belliveau that she is, as Barthes puts it, "a reality one can no longer touch."³⁸ If affect and touch share a strong physiological and conceptual proximity, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick stresses that they do,³⁹ then the painful sting associated with the *punctum* for Belliveau and Barthes may be connected to the recognition that their mother's touch and physical presence is lost forever. The viewer may experience a similar fate at the sight of a photograph of a deceased loved one.

³⁷ Jaret Belliveau, e-mail correspondence with the author, 11 May, 2011.

³⁸ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 87.

³⁹ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

In her book, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, Elaine Scarry proposes that “physical pain has no voice” and can be identified through its “unsharability” with others. If pain cannot be adequately translated through symbolic language then, says Scarry, seeing another in pain represents an ethical crisis because an audience can react with either doubt or certainty to its existence. In the following passage from *The Body in Pain*, she further elucidates the problems of communicating pain interpersonally:

Thus when one speaks about “one’s own physical pain” and about “another person’s pain,” one might almost appear to be speaking about two wholly distinct orders of events. For the person whose pain it is, it is “effortlessly” grasped... while for the person outside the sufferer’s body, what is “effortless” is not grasping it.⁴⁰

The photograph does not convey the particular sense of another’s pain; it merely communicates the presence of pain. However, even the photograph carries the burden of pain’s power to silence because it speaks not from the mouth but for the eyes: “even the artist—whose lifework and every habit are to refine and extend the reflexes of speech—ordinarily falls silent before pain.”⁴¹ The problem of grasping another’s pain can be explored in images such as *Untitled* (2004) (fig. 3), where the Belliveau’s mother receives the horrific news of her worsening condition by a doctor while her family surrounds her.

If emotional and physical pain cannot be communicated through verbal language, then the absence of a detailed caption for the photograph strongly supports this idea. In the photograph Belliveau’s mother is seated on the side of her hospital bed leaning forward while she openly

⁴⁰ Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 3-4.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 10.

weeps with her face in her hands. A family member holds her to console her in the foreground as her husband listens to the doctor in the background. Beside her husband a nurse practitioner looks on at the embrace while her son, the photographer, takes a photograph of the scene from



Figure. 3. Jaret Belliveau, *Untitled*, from the *Dominion Street* series, 2004.
Image courtesy of the artist.

the opposite corner of the room. Consequently, we are not able to perceive his reaction; however, we can recognize the emotional pain of his mother through empathic identification. For Cartwright, “in empathy...*I recognize the feelings I perceive in your expression*. “You” move me to have feelings, but the feelings may not match your own.”⁴² Because most people are familiar with the bodily and facial gestures associated with feelings, particularly pain, they can recognize its presence in this image and respond to it by feeling for Belliveau’s mother. Again,

⁴² Cartwright, *Moral Spectatorship*, 24.

it is not important that audiences know the Belliveau family personally; they can still forge meaningful relationship with them through empathy.

Belliveau's work demonstrates the value of family love and connectedness, but also the ephemerality of life itself. As part of documenting his mother's story living with cancer, he represents a crucial fragment of it, the pain accompanying treatment, on her behalf. Not only was this process important for the artist, who made sense of his mother's illness through his photography practice, but the images also touch audiences by allowing them to draw "strength and renewal" by engaging personal memory⁴³ of loved ones who have passed away from cancer.

Conclusion

Jennifer Fisher has argued that art galleries and museums operate as sites for affective and experiential relationships between art and audiences. This allows curators to organize affect in a way that manipulates how audiences feel and understand artwork. For Fisher, "the exhibition rhetorics formulated by curators link objects and viewers in syntagmatic spatial relations that function as a kind of preferred reading. The aesthetic can describe the activation of an exhibition in a process that energizes and connects objects, space and individuals."⁴⁴ The idea of connecting bodies in the space of an exhibition can be related to the body as both a material reality and an incorporeal abstraction open to affective intensities. For Brian Massumi, affect is "autonomous to the degree to which it escapes confinement in the particular body whose vitality, or potential for interaction, it is. Formed, qualified, situated perceptions and cognitions fulfilling

⁴³ Bassnett, "Archive and Affect in Contemporary Photography," 246.

⁴⁴ Jennifer Fisher, "Exhibitionary Affect," *n.paradoxa: international feminist art journal*, special issue, "Curatorial Strategies," Vol. 18 (2006): 27-33.

functions of actual connection or blockage, are the *capture* and closure of affect.”⁴⁵ Massumi’s explication demonstrates that affect is an interactive phenomenon grasped by the qualification of emotion. In other words, affect is a form of contagion amongst bodies in space. Massumi does not express emotion as a constitutively negative connotation, he merely suggests that the body makes sense of affect through emotional registers; thus, people can experience empathy out of making sense of affect. Teresa Brennan similarly suggests that the “transmission of affect” is social or psychological in origin and is responsible for specific bio-chemical alterations to the human body. This idea goes against standard notions of Western Individualism, where emotions and energies are contained naturally within each and every body. In her definition, affect is fundamentally an energetic force capable of permeating the skin of other bodies resulting in enhancement or depression of physiological energies.⁴⁶ By illustrating the social functions of affect, Brennan, like Fisher and Massumi, position affect as a socially interactive and interpersonal occurrence:

I am using the term “transmission of affect” to capture a process that is social in origin but biological and physical in effect. The origin of transmitted affects is social in that these affects do not only arise within a particular person but also come from without. They come via an interaction with other people and an environment. But they have a physiological impact. By the transmission of affect, I mean simply that the emotions or affects of one person, and the enhancing or depressing energies these affects entail, can enter into another.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Brian Massumi, “The Autonomy of Affect,” *Cultural Critique*, No. 31, The Politics of Systems and Environments, Part II (Autumn, 1995): 96.

⁴⁶ Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect*, 1.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.

Because it may be impossible for individuals to fully separate the affects they emit from their environment and from other individuals, in Brennan's sense of the term, affect is essentially capable of transmission from one person to another and back again. In this regard, engagement with particular artworks in the space of an exhibition may involve the circulation, sharing, and absorption of particular affects and energies amongst audiences. Brennan also suggests that affect can be identified by "the form of transmission whereby people become alike is a process whereby one person's or one group's nervous and hormonal systems are brought into alignment with another's."⁴⁸ If this is possible, then the affects produced by artwork in a viewer can, at least in theory, be absorbed and experienced by another viewer.

In this exchange viewers may capture and make sense of affects present and circulating in the atmosphere of the exhibition space. And because affect may be capable of transmission among audiences, their empathic experience of seeing artwork, particularly trauma-related artwork, expands Bennett's concept of "empathic vision" by conceptualizing an empathic affect between different bodies who share a similar space. Through this we can envision new ways of thinking about exhibition space and the types of relationships between individuals and groups that may open possibilities to bridge differences. In our responsibility to empathize for other people, particularly through visual art, empathy may be transmitted and absorbed by other people to forge a similar ethic, an ethic of affect.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 9.

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