

INTRODUCTION



Intimacy Unguarded: how the personal becomes material

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The research project *Intimacy Unguarded* (2014 to ongoing), and its various public symposia and workshops came about through our discussions, as colleagues at Central Saint Martins, University of the Arts London, on the mutual research interests that drive our work, both as a critical theorist and writer (Joanne Morra) and as an artist (Emma Talbot). Although we do different things and work in different ways, we each recognized the personal as vital to our own production: as a subject and as an internal and individual space of thinking, exploring and examining. When trying to identify the personal, we talked of an internal site that is interpretive, receptive and responsive. Any articulation of the personal is through some type of production (of words, images, gestures, etc.) whether conscious or unconscious. Without such production, the personal seems invisible to others, yet is continually present, as a constant and ongoing internal narrative in each of us. The personal is determined by culture, yet does not adopt it wholesale. It is the idiosyncratic thing that makes us who we are – yet it is problematic – raising questions of gender, sexuality, family, love, honesty, truth, history, memory, subjectivity, politics and expression. The personal is certainly something that we possess in our own right. And yet, we are also possessed by it. To expose the personal is risky. And it is this risk that we and our authors, privilege and take through the project *Intimacy Unguarded*.

The title of the project, *Intimacy Unguarded*, was a phrase used in Talbot's notes on her thinking about the personal, and together Talbot and Morra have explored this highly complex conjunction – of the notion of intimacy and the verb unguarded – by developing a project that asks: What do we risk in revealing, that is unguarding, the intimacies that constitute our lives, our actions, our thoughts, our traumas, our desires, our failures? We are acutely aware that risk is inherent in using the personal as material, and this can be difficult, but risk can also be highly productive and liberating. As such, the personal is an exciting and rich space to be addressed and investigated, and *Intimacy Unguarded* offers itself as such a site in which to consider this task.

Drawing on the work of artists, writers and critical theorists *Intimacy Unguarded* explores creative and critical approaches to making the personal the material for one's practice: thus, autobiography, biography and memoir are key. *Intimacy Unguarded* examines how autobiography operates as a creative space, the use of biography in contemporary art and the persuasive voice of memoir as a bridge between factual events and imagination.

Aiming to acknowledge the power and function of the subjective as material, *Intimacy Unguarded* provides a platform for determining what is at stake for artists and writers who

articulate personal, inner worlds to an audience today. Whether in the form of autobiography or memoir, the overlap and simultaneity of intimacy and public-ness, questions of authenticity, truth, memory and the reconstruction of events are paramount. Given biography's potential as a reflective document and elegy, *Intimacy Unguarded* also considers its adoption and adaptation by contemporary artists as a fragmented form in which the personal is shared to be reflected upon, rather than offered to others as a template for living.

This eponymous issue of the *Journal of Visual Art Practice* is a collection of material that has been generated by our ongoing series of discursive events. We have selected papers from our symposia and workshops, as well as inviting some of our participants to develop articles or artists' pages based on their presentations at our events. (For more information on the project, please see, <http://www.arts.ac.uk/csm/csm-research/intimacy-unguarded/>).

Taking on board autobiography and memoir's complex negotiation of fact and fiction, truth and necessary lies, self-knowledge and misrecognition, memory and the continual reconstruction of events, the presenting participants in our first symposium at CSM titled 'Art, Autobiography, Memoir' set the stage for the project *Intimacy Unguarded* by asking: Why is it impossible to write one's life? What is to be done with all of the fragments that constitute a life? What is love, and how do we represent it? What is experienced when holding another human? What happens when we are no longer able to recognize ourselves? How can we create a liveable life story?

One of the speakers at this first symposium, *Jon Cairns*, has contributed an article based on his presentation concerning the intensity that *performed acts* of intimacy provoke between artists and their audience. By focusing on Annie Sprinkle and Beth Stephen's recurring marriage ceremonies, Cairns highlights the fissure and co-dependency in operation between the personal and political and reveals what is at stake for the audience both as participants and as viewers of secondary documentation. *Adrian Rifkin's* performance-lecture at this first symposium was exactly in the spirit of our concerns. Including a recording of his mother's voice from his childhood, and readings from important works of fiction that constituted his youthful sense of self, Rifkin questioned the ideas of belonging, authorship and identity. In addition, he demonstrated the in-between within oneself and in relation to others that defines the territory of unguarded intimacy. In this issue, Rifkin captures the inflections of his presentation in a thoughtful and disarming text.

Intimacy Unguarded's next adventure was to invite US writer and editor of the Native Agents series for Semiotext(e), *Chris Kraus* (*Aliens and Anorexia, Summer of Hate, I Love Dick, Where Art Belongs*) to visit CSM. This event took place before the TV adaptation of *I Love Dick*, when the book had a cult status, but not yet the global reach of the televisual. The book uses a series of letters, feverishly penned by 'Chris' to 'Dick', the man with whom she is obsessed, as a structure for revealing the way the intimate is bound to critical thinking. Kraus' work interweaves life experiences with references to artists and artwork, critical theory and philosophy. It was a pleasure to personally introduce our students (an important part of the *Intimacy Unguarded* project is our inclusion of CSM Art Programme students from BA to PhD in the development of our project and events) and participants from Raven Row and Afterall to Kraus through an open seminar in which we invited participants to 'Write A Letter to Chris Kraus' and to hear Kraus's lively and insightful

responses. We have included three of the letters (with grateful thanks to their writers; *Helena De Pulford*, *Georgia Mota* and *Natasha Soobramanien*) in this issue, as well as a couple of excerpts from *I Love Dick*, by way of giving a flavour of Kraus' métier and marking the public *Intimacy Unguarded* event where Kraus gave a reading and engaged in a lively and thought-provoking Q&A with Emma Talbot.

One of the most intimate aspects of the human subject is the unconscious. As such, *Intimacy Unguarded* also considers the ways in which this material becomes the basis for contemporary art, critical writing and the dynamics of the consulting room. Several of the authors and artists whose work is included in this issue of the *Journal of Visual Art Practice* participated in our second symposium, 'Intimacy Unguarded: Gender, the Unconscious and Contemporary Art', held at and supported generously by the Freud Museum London. As well as first-hand accounts from contemporary artists who take the risk of putting the personal into the public arena, there was a reading of the intimate portrayal in art practice of the site of death, as well as an examination of the psychoanalytic process of 'patient presentation', and what happens when the private experience of being in psychoanalysis becomes exposed within artistic practice.

More specifically, the symposium at the Freud Museum London provided a number of perspectives to consider ways recent artworks have dealt with the relationship between the subject of gender, the unconscious, the psychoanalytical and intimacy. As well as first-hand accounts from contemporary artists such as *Sadie Murdoch*, who has contributed some significant artists' pages for this publication, and a chance to hear *Griselda Pollock* present new material on the work of Marlene Dumas, which we are delighted to publish in this issue, there was an examination of the Lacanian psychoanalytic process of 'Patient Presentation' by *Diana Caine* and *Denis Echarid* which has been beautifully transposed into an article. The patient presentation is a form of theatre, a process in which patients are interviewed before a group of experienced and trainee psychoanalysts. Although this article is not specifically about contemporary art, it opens up the importance of the theatre of the mind for many artists who use personal and autobiographical material in their practice.

Our own contributions at that symposium, and revised for this publication, can provide only a slice of what engages each of us with this project, through the work we do. *Emma Talbot's* article examines processes through which personal material is articulated within her art practice, and closes a gap between writing and drawing, by viewing intimacy in visual art through the philosophical lens of *parler femme* and *écriture féminine*. *Joanne Morra* considers the possibilities offered when a form of psychoanalytic transference extends beyond the consulting room and is experienced as a troubling affective response to artworks based on an artist's own psychotherapy.

Intimacy Unguarded opens up ideas, concerns, passions, failures and promises in order to establish engaging and thought-provoking dialogue on the matter of how the personal becomes material. Many questions are raised, and much is left open. Surely, this is an appropriate ending to the unfinished work of autobiography and memoir: work that is always unfinished and ongoing as we continue examining ourselves and take the risk of exposing this to one another. In this spirit, we offer *Intimacy Unguarded* and this issue of the *Journal of Visual Art Practice* to our participants and readers as a means of continuing these dialogues.

Notes on contributors

Dr Joanne Morra is Reader in Art History and Theory at Central Saint Martins, University of the Arts London. She convenes The Doctoral Platform at CSM, and is Founding Principal Editor of *Journal of Visual Culture*. She has published widely on contemporary art and psychoanalysis, including in: *The Limits of Death* (co-edited with Robson and Smith, MUP 2000); *New Formations* (Spring 2002); *The Prosthetic Impulse: From a Posthuman Present to a Biocultural Future* (co-edited with Smith, MIT 2006); *Journal of Visual Culture* (April 2007); *Journal of Modern Art* (December 2009). She has become particularly interested in spaces of practice (the studio, study, gallery, classroom and consulting room) and what each space can offer the others. Publications on this topic include: 'Seemingly Empty: Freud at Berggasse 19, A Conceptual Museum in Vienna', *Journal of Visual Culture* (April 2013); 'The Work of Research: Remembering, Repeating and Working-through', in *What is Research in the Visual Arts? Obsession, Archive, Encounter*, eds. Holly and Smith (MIT/Clark 2008); the curatorial project *Saying It* (Freud Museum London 2012); 'On Use: Art Education and Psychoanalysis', *Journal of Visual Culture* (April 2017). Her recent book *Inside the Freud Museums: History, Memory and Site-Responsive Art* will be out in October 2017 (IB Tauris). She is working on her next book, *In the Studio and On the Couch: Art, Autobiography and Psychoanalysis*.

Emma Talbot is an artist and academic at the Royal College of Art. Recent one person exhibitions include 'Open Thoughts', Neuer Aachener Kunstverein; 'Stained With Marks of Love', Arcadia Missa, NY; 'Condo', Arcadia Missa, London; 'The World Blown Apart', Galerie Onrust, Amsterdam; 'Time After Time', Petra Rinck Galerie, Düsseldorf; 'Unravel These Knots', Freud Museum, London. Her work is included in two Thames and Hudson publications: 'Drawing People' by Roger Malbert and '100 Painters of Tomorrow' by Kurt Beers and is in the following collections: Saatchi, David Roberts Foundation, KRC Collection, The Netherlands, City of Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth, and Museum Arnhem, The Netherlands.

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