

Profile

Moyra Davey

In her 2020 debut novel *The Baudelaire Fractal*, Canadian poet Lisa Robertson describes how avid readers acquire ‘the gradual ability, similar to the learning of a new handicraft, to perceive the threads linking book to book, and so to enter, through reading, a network of relationship’. This statement could well serve as an epigraph to fellow Canadian artist Moyra Davey’s latest publication, *Index Cards*, 2020. The book comprises a miscellaneous ensemble of Davey’s texts written over the past two decades (the oldest piece, aptly titled ‘The Problem of Reading’, was penned in 2003). The collection includes essays on photography, personal reflections on contemporary art, transcripts of voice-overs for five of Davey’s films (made between 2006 and 2019), and compilations of diary entries, lists, quotes and other fragments. The texts, which are ordered non-chronologically, smoothly overlap to create a crisscross texture wherein similar situations and dilemmas are rehashed, quotations are repeated, familiar figures return with intimate regularity, their re-appearitions slightly transfigured by the passing of time. Recursive and prismatic, like different takes in a film, the texts often frame the same material from different angles, opening up a new tangent of thought, or adding a new reference or strata of meaning. Touching on subjects as diverse as motherhood, illness, psychoanalysis, addiction, the linguistic effects of colonisation and the ethics of photographic representation, Davey’s texts proceed obliquely, askew; they are prone to distraction and the soft or swerve-like derailment of chance encounters and events. Taken together, they trace the developmental arc of the layered and composite practice of a bibliophile artist who has weaved a life-long passion for literature and theory into her work.

Index Cards is a catalogue of Davey’s reading habits and preferences. Like Virginia Woolf, Davey favours reading with ‘pen & paper’, an act that is sprawling and spawning, chance-

inflected and generative. Reading begets writing, and writing begets reading too: the permeable, membrane-like border separating the two is routinely dissolved. Like threads unwound from the skein of books, citations are ‘interwoven’ in *Index Cards* like ‘in a carpet’ – the metaphor used by Theodor Adorno to characterise the literary form of the essay. Fabricating an expansive texture of relations between writers, thinkers and artists, Davey creates a tapestry of unexpected connections. Unlikely pairs, such as Robert Walser and Jean Genet, are brought together via their common obsession for the materiality of writing, a fetish for paper that Davey also shares.

Davey’s associative method of reading often flits between the authors’ biographies and her own, tracing forms of kinship that are indifferent to filial consanguinity. In the film *Les Goddesses*, 2011, whose script is included in *Index Cards*, Davey links the rebellious but scarred lives of Mary Wollstonecraft, her teenage daughters and their stepsister with her own wayward, intoxicated youth in the company of her six siblings. In collapsing lives set almost exactly 200 years apart by means of a series of (slightly doctored) coincidences of birth dates and names, Davey illuminates the elective affinities that bind two moments in the long counter-history of female defiance as they are both promptly met with society’s scorn. Similarly, in the companion film *Hemlock Forest*, 2016, the familiar, direct address of the pronoun ‘you’ shifts abruptly from Barney, Davey’s adolescent son, to Chantal Akerman, whose sudden death at the time of filming altered the nature of the work, culminating in a paean to the prematurely deceased filmmaker and a note of gratitude for her influence on the artist’s own work.

Davey’s most recent film, *i confess*, 2019 (whose script closes *Index Cards*), is yet another, albeit more lateral attempt to unravel and make sense of her past experiences. While reading James Baldwin, Davey is suddenly reminded of Québécois nationalist writer Pierre Vallières,

author of the highly controversial 1968 memoir *Nègres blancs d'Amérique*, which was disturbingly translated in 1971 as *White N of America*. This problematic comparison is undercut halfway into the film by the appearance of French-Canadian political philosopher Dalie Giroux, who brilliantly unpacks Vallières's racial blind spots and his misguided comparison of white Québécois experience with African-American history. The political complexities of Québec's dual identity – both colonised and coloniser of First Nation peoples – are nonetheless filtered through Davey's own personal history and lived experience: her childhood in Montreal, where she felt ashamed to be an anglophone outsider, and her later encounter with Vallières in the 1980s. At the time, he had retired from political activities to a hippie commune; his portraits, taken by Davey, punctuate the narration in the film.

Index Cards features only a small number of scaled-down, black-and-white reproductions of Davey's photographs. This is the first of Davey's books in which writing is treated and presented independently from her work in photography and film. The gambit is that these pieces of writing – including functional texts such as film scripts – can stand on their own. This is a welcome and fascinating perspective that foregrounds the centrality of writing in Davey's practice. In 'Caryatids and Promiscuity', a self-reflective text prompted by the making of *Les Goddesses*, Davey reveals: 'One of the ways I'd kept photography alive for myself was through writing. The word could redeem a failed picture, text could invigorate and give new direction to a stalled practice.' In the spirit of Herve Guibert's *Ghost Image* (one of Davey's touchstones), *Index Cards* offers writing as an alternative form of accessing photography. With only two exceptions, the miniaturised images are placed at the beginning or end of the texts to which they relate, as if they were mere contact sheets. The full image, they seem to suggest, can only be developed in and through writing.

Born in Toronto in 1958, Davey started taking photographs in the late 1970s, using herself and her teenage siblings as models. Steeped in a punkish vibe, the black-and-white, hard-edged close-ups squarely encase the Davey sisters in matching tank tops, androgynous haircuts and defiant poses. Nakedness and sexual ambivalence are wielded as weapons, and yet a note of melancholy or vulnerability seems to veil their assertive, frontal gazes. While attending university in Montreal and San Diego (and, later, the Whitney Independent Study Program in New York), Davey was introduced to the critique of photographic representation, which was then in its heyday. Reading Martha Rosler, Allan Sekula, Craig Owens, John Berger and Laura Mulvey, she began to question and rethink her work to date, including her sisters' group portraits: were these photographs voyeuristic or exploitative? What did it mean to exhibit female nudes devoid of context in the aseptic and appropriating space of a gallery? Add to this an episode in Brixton when, at an anti-apartheid protest, Davey took two photos of a young Rastafarian boy before his father scolded her and demanded that the film be destroyed. Nothing is farther away from Davey's photographic practice than the arrogant ethos of the (male) street photographer, carefree and risk-taking, out to capture a snapshot of the world with the self-assurance of a property owner. The mortification and sense of unease that these situations engendered were visceral, bodily felt: she describes them as 'shocks' and 'sites of trauma' that she feels compelled to revisit.

Gradually, the human figure disappeared from Davey's photographic work, except for the occasional vendors' heads peeping out of a newsstand kiosk in a series made in 1994. For a long period, her camera's lens was firmly fixed on the inanimate world: empty whiskey bottles, defaced currency, dust gathering under the bed, on record sleeves or the spines of books stacked on overstuffed shelves. Yet Davey eventually came to agree with Walter Benjamin's statement that 'to do without people is for photography the most impossible of renunciations'. In *Les Goddesses*, she revisited her teenage sisters' portraits, the directional

brutality of the camera undercut and deflected by ‘a pointed, relentless narrative’. At the same time, she found herself taking photographs of people again: passengers scribbling on the subway, reminiscent of Walker Evans’s subway portraits, Chris Marker’s *Passengers* on the Paris Metro and Akerman’s New York subway shots in *News from Home*. When I asked Davey about her relation to the 1980s critique of photography today, she told me that it’s still relevant to her. ‘I’m just not as categorical in my refusal to participate,’ she elucidated. ‘I actually believe it’s important to photograph people, but of course it’s how you do it. It has to be a thoughtful process. And sometimes photographs really need words.’

If writing has served to critically enliven Davey’s photographic practice, photography stirs and drives her writing too. Her work explores both the literary qualities of photography (writing with light) and the photographic qualities of literature, pushing at and reinventing the porous borders of both. Slippages and permutations between the two media abound in her texts: the point-and-shoot camera that steals glances of the *Subway Writers* is itself characterised as a ‘note-taker’; Wollstonecraft’s and Goethe’s vivid and spontaneous travel writings are likened to snapshots; and the fragmentary quotes that she assembles are referred to as ‘word-pictures’. The same fluid, two-way traffic exists between Davey’s writing and filmmaking. Davey professes her desire to make videos that ‘take root in words’, but these words are, in turn, prompted by the act of filming. In *Hemlock Forest*, for instance, a tracking shot of tree trunks taken from a camera placed on a car’s dashboard is dubbed ‘low-hanging fruit’ – easily obtained and with little at stake. This is contrasted with Davey’s attempt to recreate the subway scenes from *News from Home*, or to take studio portraits of her adolescent son and his friends. In taking these images, Davey ventures outside a self-prescribed safe space to pursue what, in a somewhat cumbersome phrase, she calls the ‘opposite of low-hanging fruit’. Watching her films and reading the scripts in close succession, it is difficult to tell which comes first: image or text. They are closely entangled

and mutually generating. When I asked Davey about her working method, she told me that she almost always starts with an unfinished text, and then moves back and forth between shooting and writing, as the former gives her a sense of what works and what does not. 'The filming, with all its unanticipated formal drifts and accidents,' she added, 'can generate new ideas and scenes and alter the course of the narrative.'

The fragment is the form that suits Davey best. Almost all the texts in *Index Cards* consist of terse, paratactically arranged passages, either dated or titled in capital letters with a person's name or a generic word. Her films are similarly composed of discontinuous segments, often introduced by a white intertitle on black leader. Davey's penchant for the fragment is closely aligned with her interest in the archival technology of the index card that gives the collection (and one of its texts) its title. In the essay 'Notes on Photography & Accident', Davey mentions Barthes' habit of jotting down notes on the fly in a slim note-book and later using index cards to transcribe and archive these skeletal intuitions (apparently, he left behind at least 12,250 such cards). Barthes' practice of note-taking resonates strongly with Davey's artistic method, which retains the open-endedness of the notebook and the unprocessed spontaneity of the journal entry. Like index cards, archival records (whether verbal or visual) can be permanently reordered and indefinitely expanded; they are lost and found, misplaced, overlooked and then retrieved. 'Dipping into the archive is always an interesting, if sometimes unsettling, proposition,' Davey notes in the same essay. 'Ultimately, the process is like tapping into the unconscious, and can bring with it the ambivalent gratification of rediscovering forgotten selves.' Stumbling upon the shards of personal documents – old photographs, half-forgotten notebooks, excised passages in abandoned files – Davey approaches her own biography indirectly by means of both self-citation and self-compilation, a metabolic process that is haunted by the 'uneasy feeling of cannibalising' herself.

In her artwork and writing, Davey regularly and overtly inserts, or to use one of her favoured terms, ‘interpolates’ herself. All her texts are punctured by and anchored in the insistent use of the pronoun ‘I’ (sometimes ousted by ‘she’, because ‘some things are only imaginable in the third person’). Since her first film *Hell Notes*, 1990, she has always performed a written narration in front of the camera. Headphones on, tape recorder or iPhone in hand, she repeats a pre-recorded text as she paces around her apartment-studio (Davey credits Suzanne Bocanegra for introducing her to this method, first adopted in *Les Goddesses*). In her stumbling, uncertain diction – the opposite of conventional and authoritative off-screen voice-overs – Davey candidly, if often obliquely, divulges episodes of physical abjection, shame, empty-nest syndrome, fear of failure, and all those overpowering or degrading feelings that with characteristic economy she terms ‘the Wet’. She closely identifies with and is fond of repeating Rainer Werner Fassbinder’s famous dictum: ‘The more honestly you put yourself into the story the more the story will concern others as well.’ This act of sharing is incredibly generous because it knowingly dismantles social taboos that individualise and pathologise certain experiences which more usually compel shame and silence, yet the compulsion to self-exposure is also tempered by the needs of self-preservation and the fear that, as Davey told me, she may ‘slip into a confessional mode that feels gratuitous, or exhibitionistic’. There are things that she might never be ready to tell: removed passages relegated to a private archive titled ‘Pathography’.

This insistent and yet refracted performative engagement with autobiography is a key feature of Davey’s oeuvre. We may, perhaps, term it ‘auto-fiction’ (a descriptor Davey herself uses to characterise the script of *Fifty Minutes*, 2006), although her work is devoid of the fastidious narcissism and affectation that attend some of the form’s contemporary iterations. Her interest in literature, as with photography, is tied to its documentary or even indexical character. This explains Davey’s preference for provisional prose forms like diaries, letters,

travelogues and notes: all forms of crude writing that approximate the quality of photographic immediacy. Sifting through the textual paraphernalia of literary lives, Davey looks for those minor details of the everyday, almost unconsciously registered, that hit her with a thrill of truth or the shudder of self-recognition. When re-reading, for instance, Jane Bowles's letters, written after her stroke at age 40, Davey, who was recently diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, is brought back to her own failing body. This body, ill and frail, flickers on and off the page in the same way that, in her films, Davey's nervous, thin silhouette appears in broken fragments as she wanders in and out of the camera's static frame. Unpredictable symptoms – impaired vision, drowsiness, incontinence, erratic bowels – crop up in flashes among diary entries, alongside mysterious, cryptic names of treatments and drugs (Arsenic Album, Cymbalta). These moments, like the 'punctum' in a photograph, pierce the text with their frank yet elusive presence. It is here, perhaps, where writing most vividly approaches the mute bluntness of the photographic image.