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BFA Hons Essay

Let's Talk About The Good Times

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*I'm not a smoker.
But I am fond of smoking when it's just the two of us.
Share an affinity with you for 10min.
Before we return to the party.*

I wish for this essay to function as an investigation of 'sentiment' and why it is essential to my personal art practice. The personal realm and its place within art making has become one of my prime concerns. The personal realm relates to one's private life and relationships. Our personal experiences shape our perception of the world and form our public persona. To be sentimental is to be emotionally idealistic about one's personal experiences. I wish to explore the idea of the personal experience through the medium of performance. How do our sentimentalities and personal experiences affect our outlook and relationships in everyday life?

Some time ago now, only a small time before my high school graduation, my father committed suicide. His funeral was held in The Church of the Cross in Turangi. My mother and I made a pilgrimage of sorts, a silent 4-hour drive to the church. I had always considered sentimentality to be a byproduct of death, a time to recall the 'good times' and the 'fond memories' of the deceased. This behaviour was not indulged by anyone on this occasion. There were however, a series of brittle euphemisms included in the ceremony, phrases like 'unfortunate circumstances,' 'when he left us,' 'the passing of.'

"We came to clean the house every second Friday. Occasionally, we would let ourselves in to find that Frank had left his shopping still bagged on the kitchen floor. It had been there for days, half eaten by the Alsatian."

She laughed.

On the drive home I felt dissatisfied. I vowed to mark his death with a gesture. I brought myself a plain silver ring and had his name engraved on the inside. It was a marriage to his passing. I wore it every day for three and a half years.

'Nostalgia as sentimentality is the ability to focus on or remember something pleasant in the midst of what may have in fact been tragedy and horror'.¹

¹ Solomon, Robert C. *In Defense of Sentimentality*. (New York: Oxford University Press 2004), 18

Sentiment is an action. It is a kind of performance. Sentiment is recollection concentrated into a sugar cube. The conversation you had by the fire embodied in a glass of wine, a meditative walk taken after an inconceivable event from last night, a long hot shower after the migraine finally passed. Sentiment is a cleansing, a cliché, a frosted private memorial. It is the embodiment of sensation, your bottle of lemon-honey cordial. Pink-tinting the everyday.

Remember your hometown? Is this the space you still reside? Regardless, you have spent a significant amount of time here.

Go home. Recall who you were 6 months ago, 12 months ago, 4 years ago and so on. Walk around areas that are familiar to you. You are someone else now.

*Do you see people you used to know?
appearing from the distance,
catching a bus,
working behind a counter,
walking toward you,
walking towards them,
walking through one another, behaving like ghosts.
The world revolves around the main street intersection. This is the everyday haunt.*

*A few weeks ago, I bought myself an Auckland Explorer bus-pass to perform tourist,
experience the renaissance of my city.*

Sentiment is to allow one's self to be haunted. It is an affecting tenderness sparked by self-inflicted nostalgia. It is the letter you keep in a shoebox hidden in the depths of your wardrobe. It is the high school trophy in the cabinet at the bottom of the stairs. It is the song you slow danced to in the bar. Sentiment is a metaphor concretised into a personal gesticulation.

"And now we're dying like the ants, drowning slowly in a summer sink of dishes.

Receding like the golden bikes of yore along the glory roads of the yesterday.

The dust is settling on a wasted page and now we're in another stage.

Our friends have all forgotten us, but did they really like us and were they really good times?

La la, la la la, la la la" – Lawrence Arabia²

Sometimes there are experiences in life that cause you to brim over. Experiences that alter your personal state, like somebody's death or leaving home for the first time. You may have felt

² Arabia, Lawrence. "Talk About The Good Times", Lawrence Arabia. (Lil Chief Records) 2006. CD.

extraordinarily isolated. You wonder, is anyone else noticing? These moments offer you a sense of identity and perspective. It's important to acknowledge these moments or at least write them down. If you don't, in time you will forget the pathology of your thinking. It's strange how easily we forget what grief felt like.

'*La Visite Guidee*' is a work by Sophie Calle in which she exhibits a series of her personal possessions accompanied by autobiographical notes. I read this work as an act of sentimentalism as the objects are meaningless but for her emotional attachment to them. One item presented was a coffee cup. Calle writes 'I stole the cup as a memory of our lunch together.'³

For weeks after the event of a sudden heartbreak, I consumed nothing but toast, red wine and packets of Marlboro Gold. A lot of time was spent idly listening to Stevie Nicks, chain smoking and gazing self-indulgently into the back garden. He visited me one afternoon and gifted me a handmade book of his recent travel photos. It's now late October and I still can't bring myself to look at it. On occasion a guest will pick it up from my coffee table and tell me how wonderful it is.

When you forget, memory becomes mythology. The travel book is my little artifact. It is a document of what happened.



'Travel Book'. Documentation. 23 October 2014

³ Calle, Sophie. *La Visite Guidee*. (Rotterdam, Museum Boymans-van Beuningen, 1996)

Towards the end of summer, my friends and I drove out to the Cement Works. It is the ruins of the Mahurangi Cement Factory, abandoned since 1928. The remains of the factory are a lofty shell of concrete and brick, rusty, over-grown and mossy. Surrounding the ruins is a flooded quarry that has since been adopted as a swimming hole. Sprinting from the bank you can dive straight in. I am told it is some 70 metres to the bottom.

It was raining that day. We had stored all our belongings underneath a silo while we swam. My hands had become frozen and shrunk from the cold. I assume that was how the ring slipped off my finger.

I realised some days later. I felt obligated to be cross with myself. How unsentimental of me to be so careless. I persuaded myself that it wasn't lost. I knew exactly where it was – romanticised and safe at the bottom of the quarry.

Personal art making is an act of romanticising the everyday. My art practice is romantic in this sense. Sentimentality and romance are intertwined by their idealistic qualities. My performances are the act of making the everyday appear more charming than it really is. Perform 'cloud nine'.

The Date Club is a collaborative project between Victoria Carran and myself. There was a poem I read recently titled 'I Was Trying To Describe You To Someone'. The author writes, 'I couldn't say, "Well she looks just like Jane Fonda, except that she's got red hair, and her mouth is different and of course, she's not a movie star...I couldn't say that because you don't look like Jane Fonda at all"⁴. My relationship with Victoria reminds me of Pauline Parker and Juliet Hulme. But I can't say that; we are not like that at all.

I am privately fond of thinking about us as Marina and Ulay pre-1988. The concept that there is no self without the other, existing 'only and always in a secret embrace'⁵ – our platonic romance, encapsulated as it is by our practice could not exist without this paradox.

Victoria and I think our thoughts together. Sometimes we will be talking to one another about a practice-related-problem and suddenly we will both arrive at the same conclusion. We'll yell the answer in tandem and burst into fits of laughter.

Other times we realise that a concept we originally thought was good, is in fact quite flawed. In this case, we will postpone confrontation until absolutely necessary. Eventually one of us will crack and admit, 'that was an awful idea; lets not do that.'

"Thank God, I've been thinking the same thing." Collectively relieved.

We are very sensitive of each other in this way.

I made a joke the other day that our brains function like we are both hooked up to iCloud. I'm infinitely glad that Victoria is my [art] partner. I never grow tired of talking to her. She is very clever and never dull. Sometimes if I have funny stories, I always tell her first. We have regular 'meetings' that are a part of our practice. Often these meetings become 'hang

⁴ Brautigan, Richard. *Revenge of the Lawn* (London, Cape 1972), 78-79.

⁵ McEvelley, Thomas. *Art, Love and Friendship: Marina and Ulay, Together & Apart* (Kingston, N.Y. McPherson & Co 2010), 31-33

outs' which then delve into intimate 'tête-à-têtes'. Our relationship is sort of a prototype for the work we make. We work to structure and direct 'moments'. We want for people to appreciate the day-to-day in the way that we do. One of my favourite moments with Victoria was the night when we took off almost all of our clothes in the middle of winter and ran into the ocean.

Forget all the standard art forms. Don't paint pictures, don't make poetry, don't build architecture, don't arrange dances, don't write plays, don't compose music, don't make movies, and above all, don't think you'll get a happening out of putting all these together.⁶

'The Date Club' is our 'brand,' but the decision to brand our practice is not commercial. The intention is to use the brand as a vehicle to extend our community outside of Elam. The word 'date' implies a period of time in which something is expected to happen.

The Date Club is not so much a dating service, but works to facilitate romance and sentiment through the use of dating tropes. An example of a trope which functions within our art practice is that Victoria and I run the club as a 'couple'.

The Date Club implies an investment of time, relishing in the potential of a moment. This is achieved by providing performance spaces for people to interact and foster relationships, producing sentimental 'happenings'⁷ that require the audience to be present and emotionally reactive.

I left an instructional letter inside a copy of Mrs. Dalloway in the General Library. The letter was an invitation to an anonymous date with me. I explained, "there is a cup of coffee waiting for you at Sheinkin on Lorne Street. Please borrow this book to read while you are there. I will not attend, but please enjoy on my behalf." My only documentation of this is a letter from my collaborator, the waitress, who recounted her experience:

"Somehow I knew instinctively when they came into the café that they were here for the pre-paid flat white. Perhaps it was the old library book they carried with them. I made their coffee and went about my afternoon routine. They sat quietly reading and drinking and left without saying much."

'When you attend to how your performance affects your real life and the real life of your co-performers; and when you attend to how it may have altered the social and natural surroundings— this follow-up is also performance, and it can be basic research.'⁸

This quote from Allan Kaprow speaks to a crucial part of our art practice— 'time and temporality'. In order to experience our performances the audience must invest their time in them. This can range

⁶ Kaprow, Allan. 'How to make a happening'. Ubu Web. Accessed 3 October, 2014. Web.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Kaprow, Allen. Jeff Kelley. Essays on the *Blurring of Art and Life* (London: University of California Press, Ltd 2003), 179

from hours to days and people are free to come and go as they please. Although, the more time someone invests the more rewarding his or her experience will be. This is also true of viewing the documentation of the performance. Spending time with the documentation is an extension of the performance itself. The amount of time one spends with the work determines how much it will reveal itself.

Sometimes I like to think that the experience of encountering a new artwork is similar to that of going on a first date. Encounter with an unknown thing. Come to know, dance with it.

You are now on a date with me.

The location of the 'dates' is important to the success of the performance. The studio or gallery is not ideal as these spaces come with a set series of social conventions that transform audience members into a passive state.

Don't touch anything,
Be civilized,
Speak quietly,
Don't drink too much.

The same can be said of private spaces.

You are in someone's home,
Be respectful,
Be interesting,
And ask before opening kitchen cupboards.

After much trial and error it was decided that public parks and hotel rooms were the most fitting locations as they are spaces that don't belong to anyone. They imitate homes and private gardens – a home away from home. The audience must feel that they have as much agency over the space as the artists.

For our final work '*Suite, Sweet*', Victoria and I decided to have as little contact with our audience as possible over the course of the evening. We discovered through our previous performances that our presence at an event caused the audience to turn to us for direction. People considered us to be figures of authority. Even by being present we took away their sense of agency. By removing ourselves from '*Suite, Sweet*' the audience had to make decisions for themselves and guide each other through the night.

'City Piece I

Find a spot that is comfortable for you.
Keep the spot clean.
Think about the spot when you are away.

y.o 1996'⁹

When I first moved to Wellington I read 'City Piece I' by Yoko Ono. On evenings when I was feeling particularly lonely I would walk down to Duke Carvells and sit in the back left corner of the courtyard with a book and a glass of wine.

Find ways to be intimate with yourself.

Tropes of dating and romance are strongly ingrained in popular culture; they are clichés. Take the Romantic Comedy, for example, a genre abundant with cliché. These films all follow similar recipes and are riddled with predictable outcomes. Sensibilities warn us that that the 'rom-com' structure is banal and repetitive like watching the same film again and again. Yet, we subscribe to them because they provide us with the emotional satisfaction we so desperately desire. When one is confronted with a romantic cliché in real life, popular culture has already educated us to the meaning, what we are *supposed* to feel. What is dating if not just a series of banal social cues. Victoria and I aim to disrupt this routine.

How To Perform a 'Romance':

Take a picnic blanket,
Curate a platter of various cheeses, fruit and crackers,
Request that everyone take a seat on the blanket – sit closer together to accommodate all guests,
You may feed others but not yourself.

I want to articulate that although this performance imitates a clichéd romantic activity it does not have to function as one. The key difference here is that there are multiple people partaking in an activity designed for two. Feel close to one another; appreciate each other's company. It can be platonic. Romance can be generated effortlessly. Romance isn't something that miraculously occurs according to your horoscope, it is a produced experience. It's a product of popular culture. Just make it yourself as you would a cup of tea.

Clichés are just ordinary personal rituals and platitudes. However, these humdrum moments are really quite special. It's easy to overlook all the banal and mundane activities we perform everyday but the truth is, the boring 'Ordinary' unites us. These experiences are sentimental because they are commonalities that allow us to empathise with one another.

⁹ Ono, Yoko. *100 Acorns* (Thomas Allen & Son Ltd, Canada 2013)



'How To Perform a 'Romance'. Documentation. July 2014

"I decided to pay attention to brushing my teeth, to watch my elbow moving. I would be alone in my bathroom, without art spectators. There would be no gallery, no critic to judge, no publicity. This was the crucial shift that removed the performance of everyday life, from all but the memory of art...How is this relevant to art? Why is this not just sociology?¹⁰"

How many people brushed their teeth at 7.45am this morning before work?

Let's talk about Art History for a minute. I would assume all Art History majors are familiar with the concepts behind Duchamp's practice – taking a non-art object and placing it in an art context. The infamous ready-made '*Fountain*' (1917) horrified and intrigued audiences, the birth of Conceptualism. '*Fountain*' questions our presumptions about professional skill and the value and function of high art. We know this, Art History has told us countless times. Kaprow complains that this concept was soon 'trivialised' by copycats. Soon enough, any old thing could be aestheticised. "But why should we want to aestheticise "anything"? All the irony was lost in those presentations, the provocative questions forgotten. To go on making this kind of move in art seemed to me unproductive.¹¹"

This is what I should have stood up and yelled, exasperated, at my Art History lecturer – if only had been I been able to articulate myself. All the meaning was lost.

It seems to me that Kaprow wished to push the concept of the common ready-made further and build upon what Duchamp had started. To blur the line behind art and life.

It is important to think about routine experiences like brushing your teeth. In those 5 minutes you perform a private moment and play out the human condition. This is a monumentally significant

¹⁰ Kaprow, Allen. 'Art Which Can't Be Art'. *Ubu Web*. Accessed 4 October, 2014. Web.

¹¹ Ibid.

experience. So you were planning on visiting the art gallery today? Have you tried brushing your teeth instead? How about making your bed, or using a urinal? These performances are each little pictures of ourselves. When you begin to speculate on these images it changes the way you view the public domain, how you understand yourself and those around you ¹².

“This is where the paradox lies; an artist concerned with life like art is an artist who does and does not make art” ¹³.

Answering my previous question, I have no clue how many people brushed their teeth this morning, probably millions. It doesn't matter; it doesn't even have to be tooth brushing. What is crucial here “is the resonance of that activity in the larger human context... ordinary life performed as art/not-art, can charge the everyday with metaphoric power.”¹⁴

This is what I aim to achieve when I smoke a cigarette, and also what I aim to achieve in my art practice. It's the resonance of an activity. A 20 packet of brooding moments. Pre-reserved time for self-reflection. The opportunity for potential kinship at a party. It is an imagined rapport with millions of others who are leaning out their bedroom window at 2am wondering what to do next. It's the 'social resonance' of the cigarette.

“...Committing one's life to the possibility of a world of love, generosity, kindness, awe and wonder at the grandeur of creation, joyous celebration of the Unity of All Being, and a deep recognition that the universe is created in such a way as to make possible higher and higher levels of consciousness, cooperation and love.” ¹⁵

Although an artist will never meet all his or her viewers, it is vital to sense the loose strings of companionship one now shares with these individuals. We are a collective consciousness.

'I was with friends one evening. Talking away, our mouths were gently spilling air and hints of what we'd eaten. Our breaths, passing among us, were let go and reabsorbed. Group Breath.'¹⁶

“I love you and shit” – is a phrase often slurred after a few drinks with friends. And it's true. Our work extends past our weekly studio class. Some of the most illuminating discussions I've had about personal art practice have been over a glass of wine, sewing rude phrases onto handkerchiefs, driving together, the cigarette outside the party, 3am in the McDonald's car park.

'Such consciousness of what we do and feel each day, its relation to others' experience and to nature around us, becomes in a real way the performance of living. And the very process of paying attention to this continuum is posed on the threshold of performance art.'¹⁷

¹² Kaprow, Allen. 'Art Which Can't Be Art'. *Ubu Web*. Accessed 4 October, 2014. Web.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Solomon, Robert C. *In Defense of Sentimentality* (Oxford University Press, New York 2004), 164

¹⁶ Kaprow, Allen. *Blurring of Art and Life*, 196.

The relationship between Victoria and I is part of our practice as much as it is a part of our everyday lives. As are our actions, thinking and mindfulness.

In the realm of conceptual arts I am very aware that 'sentiment' is no-no word. I reject this. I suppose you could say that I'm flirting with failure. "...art should move me, astonish me, break my heart, let me tremble, weep, stare, be enraged."¹⁸ I propose 'sentiment' as simply a form of tenderness and reflection. I certainly do not believe sentiment is immoral or weak. Yes, sentiment is sometimes excessive – but not always. These negative definitions have really run away on themselves. However, sentimentality seems to bear the brunt of a particular crime that I believe all forms of art are guilty of. Art is manipulative. Art constantly asserts 'I'.

"In many ways writing is the act of saying I, of imposing oneself upon other people, of saying listen to me, see it my way, change your mind. It's an aggressive, even hostile act. You can disguise its qualifiers and tentative subjunctives, with ellipses and evasions—with the whole manner of intimating rather than claiming, of alluding rather than stating—but there's no getting around the fact that setting words on paper is the tactic of a secret bully, an invasion, an imposition of the writer's sensibility on the reader's most private space."¹⁹

I propose this statement is also true of art. To involve one's self with an artwork is to allow one's self to be manipulated, even for a moment. Within a spectrum of audaciousness, art tells you, you don't tell it.²⁰

It's not so much that I wish to make art about myself; it is that I want the work to ask the audience to consider their own personal state. I want it to say, "*Hey you, what are you thinking about, right now?*"

My art practice is your dotting significant other.

'...That is precisely the virtue of sentimentality: that it stimulates and exercises our sympathies without straining or exhausting them. So considered (perhaps as a sort of spiritual exercise), sentimentality is not an emotional vice but a virtue'²¹

Earlier this year Victoria and I curated a show at Project Space. The show was titled *Encounter* and contained 6 hand made benches arranged in 2 rows. The benches had been made with the intention that only two people could sit on them at a time. *Encounter* also included the launch of our publication – a compilation of work from various New Zealand poets and writers. Hera Lindsey Bird wrote us this instructional guide for show:

¹⁷ Kaprow, Allen. *Blurring of Art and Life*, 196

¹⁸ Robert C. Solomon. *In Defence of Sentimentality* (2004)

¹⁹ Didion, Joan. 'Why I write', *New York Times Book Review*. Accessed 16 October 2014. Web.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Robert C. Solomon. *In defense of Sentimentality*, 18

How to be close to people

'When you enter a public space (an art gallery for instance, or half a wooden bench) you are breathing in the people around you. Invisible particles of the adjacent people are coming loose and you are taking them inside your lungs and pushing them out again. You are breathing these people in and out, and they are doing the same with you. This is a form of exchange. Another way to be close to people is to ring any number in the phone book and ask for someone who is not there. Or you could break your leg and someone will come and fix it for you. People are very kind in this way.'²²

When Victoria and I were making the benches I thought a lot about this one specific bench in Albert Park. It's in the area of the park behind George Fraser Gallery. Beside the path that leads straight down towards High Street. At the top of the stairs under the tree. Julian and I used to sit there frequently in 2011 during our lunch breaks. One time we had this awful fight on the bench. We both threw up because we were so sick of each other.



The Date Club. 'Bench For Two.' Photograph. August 2014

²² Carran, Victoria. Jessica Robertson. *ROM. Publication.* (Auckland, AUT Press 2014)

I've been very ill this year. I don't like explaining the illness because most people can't even begin to understand the agony of it unless you've experienced a migraine yourself.

The migraine can have any number of causes. Bright lights, noise frequencies, particular scents, a change in the weather. I'll drop dishes. Lose my keys. Leave my headlights on all night. Make tea. Forget to drink it. Drugs now make no difference once the migraine settles in.

Rather than a few hours it devours days. Waves of nausea. Temporary blindness. Even the simplest tasks become unmanageable. My ability to communicate is reduced to incoherent babble. Often the pain is so excruciating that I just can't help but cry about it. But of course that makes the migraine worse. I'm not so much crying from the pain but out of sheer frustration. The best I can do is to submerge myself in a bath. Draw all the curtains and turn out the lights. Send out a final message, "I have to cancel again. I'm sorry. I'm in agony." Even something so simple as walking downstairs to get a glass of water evades me. Often I give up on the landing and curl up, trembling on the lino.

A few weeks ago a group of us drove to Sandy Bay for the weekend. I hadn't planned on attending as I was experiencing a migraine aura. I was devoutly precautious. By Sunday I thought I'd cheated it. But then it hit me on the car ride home.

*It starts right in the base of the neck and crawls up behind your ears. Nestles in behind your eyes. I conceive it as some kind of lecherous, sci-fi brain parasite. Cunningly evading all human beleaguerments much like *The Body Snatchers*.*

I don't quite know how to describe the agony of a migraine. It's very isolating.

A few months ago I read this essay by Joan Didion called 'In Bed'. It's about migraines. And it made me feel connected again because she articulated the experience so perfectly. At the end of the essay Didion describes the aftermath of the migraine.

"And once it comes, now that I am wise in its ways, I no longer fight it. I lie down and let it happen. At first every small apprehension is magnified, every anxiety a pounding terror. Then the pain comes, and I concentrate only on that. Right there is the usefulness of migraine, there in that imposed yoga, the concentration on the pain. For when the pain recedes, ten or twelve hours later, everything goes with it, all the hidden resentments, all the vain anxieties. The migraine has acted as a circuit breaker, and the fuses have emerged intact. There is a pleasant convalescent euphoria. I open the windows and feel the air, eat gratefully, sleep well. I notice the particular nature of a flower in a glass on the stair landing. I count my blessings.²³"

I feel very sentimental after a migraine. It's good to appreciate these things. During my last attack I lay in bed listening to various radio stations online. I like listening to people talk when I'm tired. This woman, Taylor Rose Nations, was on the radio show talking about her life in this sort of disconnected way, personal stories that seemed arbitrarily told in sequence. I really liked her name a lot; it made me think she must have adoring parents who believed their daughter was destined to be a free-spirited, ambitious patriot.

²³ Didion, Joan. *The White Album* (Simon and Schuster, New York 1979), 172

Taylor Rose Nations spoke about her first job after grad school as a chemist. She would sit and count pills while watching *The Bachelor*. She entered a competition to appear as a bachelorette on the show and joked that she always had pharmacy as a back up.

Some time later Taylor Rose Nations received an email. Rather than becoming a *Bachelorette* she had been selected as one of 1000 people to colonise Mars in 2023. A one way trip. Her family couldn't understand why she wanted to go. Taylor Rose Nations explained that this was a remarkable opportunity for her. She said that her last 10 years on Earth would be significantly more special knowing that her time here was limited. She would appreciate the little things. The Mars Mission would give her life a greater sense of purpose. Taylor Rose Nations would leave behind something more meaningful than a widowed game-show husband.

Here she was, hundreds of miles away from me, romanticising death, desiring popular culture, observing her personal state and gushing with sentiment over the daily grind. Remembering moments from her life, in anticipation of the future.

No conclusion. Soufflé-light. Candy-coloured. Completely contented.

This year has been difficult for me. Perhaps I thought I would have accomplished more by the time I was 22, although I'm not sure what. 'Accomplished,' like learning not to miss my mother. As if I expected to have it all figured out. I'm doing my best. On the verge of graduation; on the cusp of adventure, good-bye to the island forever. The 'everyday' is a stage. Your performance resonates and affects those around you.

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