

Raymond Boisjoly: Remediation as Material Testimony

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I attended Raymond Boisjoly's [artist talk](http://www.ecuad.ca/about/events/273337) (http://www.ecuad.ca/about/events/273337) this past Monday at Emily Carr University that was co-presented by the Contemporary Art Gallery to mark the occasion of the Fieldhouse Studio Residency Program, of which Boisjoly is the inaugural participant. He has opened two significant exhibitions of his work in Vancouver as of late, including *As it Comes* (<http://www.contemporaryartgallery.ca/#exhibitions>), two works that are currently on display in the CAG's front windows and at the Yaletown-Roundhouse Station until April 7th. Last Thursday evening I also attended his opening at Catriona Jeffries gallery, where his new series *Interval* (<http://catrionajeffries.com/exhibitions/current/>) is being shown until April 13th. Boisjoly's work covers a lot of ground, so to speak, in that his projects are (to use the artist's own words) episodic rather than following a clear trajectory. This is not to say, however, that there is no trajectory evident in his practice but it is a trajectory that is not pre-meditated. Rather, it is something uncovered through the process of making the works, in which accidental or incidental (the latter being the artist's term) properties of the materials used to create the work come to define the work in unexpected ways. Following Maurice Blanchot, Boisjoly explained that because a work is never finished or unfinished but rather simply *is*, the work comes to act upon the artist as a task for what is to come after. *As it Comes*, when considered alongside the previous statement, is therefore a very apt description of the artist's creative process.

What the artist did not address directly in his talk but pointed to in his naming of Marcel Duchamp's "art coefficient", is the role of the spectator within the creative process. Duchamp states,

"In the creative act, the artist goes from intention to realization through a chain of totally subjective reactions. His struggle toward the realization is a series of efforts, pains, satisfaction, refusals, decisions, which also cannot and must not be fully self-conscious, at least on the esthetic plane.

The result of this struggle is a difference between the intention and its realization, a difference which the artist is not aware of."

I use the above quote as a sort of set up, to name the distance between artistic intention and outcome that Boisjoly employed to describe the gap in knowledge he experiences when first creating a work. I do not feel, however, that the artist necessarily works with an intention toward a final product that in the end has a different outcome but, rather, has a set of nebulous (meaning free-floating but interconnected) interests that inform his work in ways that are not always initially apparent. That being said, I return to Duchamp: “All in all, the creative act is not performed by the artist alone; the spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualifications and thus adds his contribution to the creative act.” [1]. (<http://www.brainpickings.org/index.php/2012/08/23/the-creative-act-marcel-duchamp-1957/>).

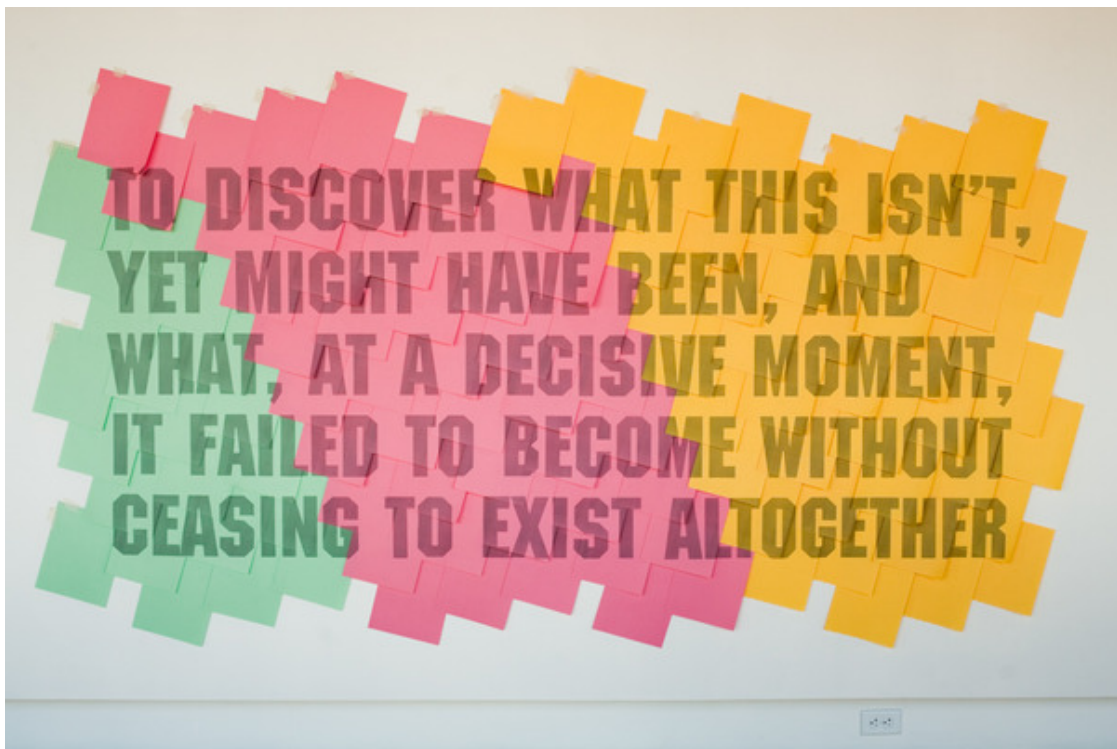


(<https://vancityart.files.wordpress.com/2013/03/asitcomes1.jpg>)

What then might the spectator bring to the installation at the Yaletown-Roundhouse station? This is certainly not something that is extensively available to us, a fact that Boisjoly drew attention to in his artist talk as well. At the beginning of the talk, he mentioned the gap between works and words as something that informs his practice, which is geared toward an examination of our received understandings of the world and to prompt us to recognize this or to shift our perception, even if in relatively mundane ways. In this way, *As it Comes* is particularly poignant in its use of language to speak directly to the interpretation of one's immediate surroundings – in this case a transit station, where the seemingly endless ebb and flow of bodies happens almost mindlessly. The garishness of the slimy green drips and monstrous yellow letters in slick vinyl (which were, by the way, expertly installed by Proper Design (<http://www.properdesign.ca/>), where my partner works) both signals this continuous-ness of life (one thing after another) while attempting to alert us to this through sheer visual impact.



(<https://vancityart.files.wordpress.com/2013/03/asitcomes2.jpg>)



(https://vancityart.files.wordpress.com/2013/03/20110712101623-boisjoly_3.jpeg)

The works installed in the CAG's windows are equally as colourful and ambivalent but are less "loud" and more poetic, with phrases like "TO DISCOVER WHAT THIS ISN'T, YET MIGHT HAVE BEEN, AND WHAT, AT A DECISIVE MOMENT, IT FAILED TO BECOME WITHOUT CEASING TO EXIST ALL TOGETHER" tile printed in faded letters onto craft construction paper (meaning non archival).

These quotes were culled from Boisjoly's reading of the genre of American Indian biographies like *Black Elk Speaks* and *During My Time: Florence Edenshaw Davidson, a Haida Woman*, the latter being about Boisjoly's great grandmother. Here the availability of text and how we come to understand through text is at issue once again, in this case, more specifically, how aboriginality is understood through text. According to Boisjoly, this genre of literature is categorized by complex bi-cultural authorship in which a speaker, a translator and a writer may all be involved in the creation of a text – a life testimony. The speaker may thus only be accessible from a distance, like the strange and often unsettling quotes Boisjoly chooses for his work. Boisjoly characterizes these texts as partial documents in that they can only partially recall their origins but are nevertheless able to speak to a larger context of aboriginal experience.

I was recently given a section of a chapter by Shoshana Felman entitled "Education and Crisis, or the Vicissitudes of Teaching" (in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, Ed. Cathy Caruth, 1995), which specifically deals with the notion of testimony, asking "*Can the process of the testimony – that of bearing witness to a crisis or a trauma – be made use of in the classroom situation?*" [2]

(http://americo.usal.es/iberoame/sites/default/files/felman_education_and_crisis.pdf). While I will not address much of the pedagogical elements of this text, Felman's discussion of testimony rang in my mind throughout Boisjoly's artist talk, and I would like to tentatively explore a few of these connections.

Felman describes a "life-testimony" as a conflation between life and text that is analagous to the relation between writing and reading in that a testimony is larger than any one life and writing is a form of bearing witness to a trauma that is, in turn, read by those who are "appointed" to bear witness – a familiar term in relation to First Nations ceremonies and cultural practices such as the Potlatch. Bearing witness connotes a responsibility as well as a burden – the immediacy of a testimony is not something that is easily transferable. According to Felman the witness is a uniquely solitary experience, "*yet, the appointment to bear witness is, paradoxically enough, an appointment to transgress the confines of that isolated stance, to speak for others and to others*" (emphasis original).

In relation to Boisjoly's statement about the inaccessibility of his great grandmother through her own "life-testimony", Felman's discussion draws attention to the testimonial nature of Boisjoly's work in its ability to speak to a larger context. Felman states that, "*testimony seems to be comprised of bits and pieces of memory that has been overwhelmed by occurrences that have not settled into understanding or remembrance, acts that cannot be construed as knowledge nor assimilated into full cognition, events in excess of our frames of reference.*" While the testimony of Boisjoly's work is not necessarily that of a traumatic event (though surely this is also included), the fugitive (to borrow a word from the project's press release) nature of the sheets of construction paper with statements that are not directly available to us, place the viewer within the *process* of testimony itself. In the case of the CAG windows, testimony is thus both subject and medium, as the fading letters transmit their message on sheets of paper that themselves attest to a vulnerability of humans: the ease of their scattering bringing a sudden demise to the message they convey.



At Catriona Jeffries, the photographic works of Boisjoly's *Intervals* series may seem even less accessible to the viewer initially, as the blurring and distorting of images blocks us from the intended transmission of the source image. This is intentional, however, as the viewer's attention is drawn to the technological processes of the image's creation: what caused the distortion and why? There is also a great deal of unintended matter interrupting the technological functioning of the work, in bits of dust and hair as well as scratches that are highly evident on the photographs.

Three YouTube videos, Pat & Lolly Vegas' *Write Me, Baby* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aCIPLO0pOts>), 1965, Buffy Sainte-Marie's *He's A Keeper Of The Fire* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zBBebprdWbw>), 1969 and Sly & the Family Stone's *Thank you* (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_MocVR3lyas), 1970 were played on an iPad that was placed on a scanner. The resulting images register the video playback as well as the scanner's motion across the iPad screen, creating distortions that reveal the RGB colours of the iPad's screen along with the scanner's collection of dust and scratches. By obscuring the images in this way, the functioning of video and scanning technologies are more truly represented, as well as speaking to photography. The temporal nature of film is not entirely lost in this, as the original images stretch out over the photograph's surface as a video stretches over time. In his artist talk, Boisjoly referenced the Lacanian real and the photograph as an index in that the works reach toward that which cannot be objectively known but persists nonetheless. The dust and scratches on the scanner are indexes of a reality that although incidental, although not available to us in ordinary circumstances, nevertheless come to constitute the image.

The videos themselves are not inconsequential, however, and Boisjoly referred to the cultural and historical contexts of the three music videos in his artist talk and his desire to represent or respond to those contexts without reproducing the original message. According to Felman, a testimony is not reproducible, referring us once again to the burden of the witness as both solitary and speaking beyond

isolation. While I do not wish to assign the artist the position of witness necessarily (though perhaps this merits consideration), the technologies used by Boisjoly mediate and re-mediate the original videos, in other words the original testimonies, through specifically material means. Interestingly, Felman even characterizes the witness as a medium, reminding me of Marshall McLuhan's famous dictum "the medium is the message".

This process is largely a matter of *incidental* material properties, however, as neither the video, iPad, or scanner are functioning in their intended ways, they interrupt one another, and the layer of dust and hair interrupts our consumption of the final photograph once again. In this way, Boisjoly is able to pay homage to Sainte-Marie's pioneering of digital art forms, for example, by re-mediating her performance through contemporary technology. The work thus accumulates meaning rather than moving from one interpretation to another, which is well suited to Felman's notion of testimony as a practice rather than a pure theory – a speech act rather than a statement. It is this position that leads Felman to a discussion of the accidental in testimony, which may also be useful for thinking through Boisjoly's incidental material properties.

If testimony is a speech act rather than a statement, it follows that "*one does not have to possess, or own the truth, in order to effectively bear witness to it; that speech as such is unwittingly testimonial; and that the speaking subject constantly bears witness to a truth that nonetheless continues to escape him, a truth that is, essentially, not available to its own speaker*" (emphasis original). If we consider that Boisjoly's use of materials also has a testimonial capability, then the material testimony that occurs is not necessarily tied up with intended function but rather properties of the materials that are not readily accessible to that intended function – something which points back to Boisjoly's use of the Lacanian real in his artist talk. (Am I performing a psychoanalysis of an iPad?) In other words, Boisjoly's *Intervals*, when read alongside Felman's text, become a "*testimony to an accident*". While "accident" may seem like too strong a word here, it is somehow felicitous in relation to Boisjoly's creative process, which evolves "as it comes," through material experimentation and remediation of texts or images that speak beyond themselves, even though the destination may be unknown to us.