

Daniel Dugas

Artist Talk at The New Gallery

A HISTORY MORE SATURATED

IMAGE & FIRE

We have all seen this: a house on fire, an apartment burning, in the middle of the night. It could have been a short in the attic, a cigarette in a bed, a curtain too close to a space heater. The firefighters are there. It's cold; the residents are outside looking at their houses, their rooms burning to the ground. As usual there are journalists reporting on the drama, asking questions, trying to figure out what happened. Some people step forward and brave the spot light. They have blankets on their shoulders; they look exhausted, fragile as they speak to the rapidity of the fire, the thickness of the smoke. As the camera pans onto the charred remains, it becomes obvious to everyone watching that some tenants were lucky to get out in time. But at the end of the interviews, many of the residents come to the sad conclusion that the photo albums; the memories of a lifetime, did not make it. There is a pause; most break down at the thought of the disappearing images.

In our visual society or 'optical civilization' as Paul Virilio likes to call it, the photo albums, analogue and digital, have transcended their mnemonic status, they have become life itself. They are what we can and cannot remember.

IMAGE & INVENTION

In 1979, at 18 years old, I hitchhiked across Canada and the USA. I decided not to bring a camera because I thought that taking pictures might interfere with my ability to remember events. In New Mexico I got a ride with an ex Korean War veteran who was also an ex Hells' Angel. As we crossed the border between New Mexico and Texas I made the mistake of commenting on the beauty of the sky and the sunset. He said that I should take a photograph. I told him that I did not have a camera and he became quite agitated. When we arrived in Amarillo, in the

panhandle of Texas, we stopped for a beer. As I sat at the counter, my driver excused himself to go to the restroom. I drank my beer, waited a while. Eventually I realized that he was gone with my backpack. At that moment, his flash of anger became clear to me. He was planning to steal my stuff and the loot was definitely lessened by the absence of a camera. Obviously I survived and made my way home from what was a real interesting trip. But the absence of physical images, of snapshots, of this wonderful sunset for example, has made room for another kind of narrative; one weaved with invention. A history more saturated if you will.

IMAGE, WORD & MEMORY

I am a videographer and a poet and I am both at the same time. I don't see a separation between the two activities. One informs the other in a Ping-Pong way. When I was ten, I found a flat stone and I started what was perhaps my first art project. I drew symbols, scribbled on it; some were like drawings, others like letters. I buried the stone in the woods near my home thinking that archeologists might find it one day. I was thrilled at the idea and could imagine a team of scientists pondering on the origin of this unknown civilization. When I think about it today, I think it's funny, and it is. It's funny but it is also ironic and subversive. There is a desire to question the establishment, the world, and the memory of the world as its stand in front and around everything. I recently did a video series called TABLETS¹, a tongue-in-cheek collection of videos extolling the magical properties of technology. I think that there is a connection between these videos and that buried stone somewhere in *Le Bois du Juvénat* in Lévis, Québec.

What We Take With Us is about points of view, about memory and memories, about what is collected, recollected, juxtaposed and ultimately imagined. It is about image and text, about the relation between text and image, about signs, about perception. It is also a project that took us on a long circle.

¹ <http://daniel.basicbruegel.com/hunger-faim-2011/>

As Valerie mentioned, in 2009 we were invited to take part in a research residency program at the Sydney College for the Arts in Sydney, Australia. The premise of the project was an exploration of internal and external experiences characteristic to travel and displacement. We met and interviewed people, collected images and sounds. Later, it became apparent that each of us had processed the experience of seeing and being differently; with our individual filters. Faced with the same set of circumstances, we were not seeing the same thing, and not reacting the same way. When we came back to Canada and began examining the material, it took six months of sifting for the idea of a two-channel video installation to take shape. We each started to build a distinct program of video-poems to be screened side by side. A funny thing happened, and we realized this only at the end of the creative process. Valerie's program starts with a piece called **SAMOA** while my program begins with **RED**. Even though the programs are looped, these two videos function as metaphorical book ends for the whole project. **RED** is an account of the dust storm² that blew over Sydney a few days after our arrival on September 23. **SAMOA**, on the other end of the shelf, is a video that was inspired by the earthquake and the tsunami that rocked the Samoan Islands on September 29.³ After the disaster, many islanders came through Australia to visit with family members. On the day of our departure, at the airport, October 22, a group of Samoans was going back home. Valerie noticed the gathering and stopped to listen to the singing. I was already past the gate and did not witness the scene.

We have worked together for 20 years, on different types of collaborative projects, while also carrying out individual practices. The degree of collaboration often changes depending on the nature of the project. Some are totally fused and others, as with **What We Take With Us**, are hybrids; comprised of discrete elements. One of our longest collaborative endeavors is probably a **Dictionary of Definitions**, we have been working on it since 1990 and it is still a work in progress. When we did

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2009_Australian_dust_storm

³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2009_Samoa_earthquake

our Masters Degrees at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, we were accepted as a collaborative team. Our project was called **Memory Bank** and was about memory and fragmentation. We envisioned a giant mirror ball, a kaleidoscope of life made up of numerous poetic documents. It was supposed to be a large dome-like structure covered with video monitors, each of them showing a looped clip. At the time, 1991 – 1993, it was a difficult technical and financial challenge and so the project evolved differently. We worked on smaller scale two-channel and three-channel video installations instead. And when I look at this installation, **What We Take With Us**, I cannot but see some aspects of **Memory Bank** resurfacing.

But projects are like that, aren't they; like Russian Dolls, nestled in each other, speaking to each other. On our way back from Australia, on that long flight back to North America, I started to write about being on the plane, about speed, about slowness, about turbulence, about the immensity of the Pacific Ocean, about the darkness of the night and the few dots of life sprinkled here and there, and about the reassuring smell of coffee floating in the cabin. These texts are now a book of poetry entitled *Au large des objets perdus*⁴. It was published in October 2011 at Les Éditions Prise de Parole.

Daniel Dugas
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In July 2012, Daniel Dugas will be starting a six-month residency in Sydney with the Café Poet Program⁵ of the Australian Poetry.

⁴ Loosely translated: Off the coast of lost objects

⁵ <http://www.australianpoetry.org/cafe-poet-program/>