

Fact, Fiction, Reality & Illusion

An Interview with Anna Plesset

by Leah Taylor

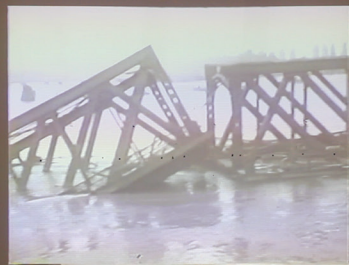


The Limitation of Fact: Stack 1, 2011-2012, oil and acrylic on plywood, 134 x 32 x 25 cm, courtesy of the artist.

Brooklyn-based artist Anna Plesset investigates and complicates the archives by culling lost or forgotten histories, and inserting new and personal narratives. Plesset's conceptual practice resides between reality and illusion, recreating symbolic objects by employing a painting technique that literally fools the eye. Her gallery installations often utilize vitrines filled with hand-made and found objects, alongside carefully selected travel ephemera, bringing into question authorship, collecting activities, and museum display. Plesset's projects critically (at times obsessively) examine and recontextualize specific histories, such as her Grandfather's film from WWII, and the studio of an unknown female Impressionist painter, Lilla Cabot Perry. I caught up with Plesset to discuss her recent exhibitions, and current body of work.

Leah Taylor: Anna, can you tell me about your recent work *Document of a Travelogue by Lt. Col. Marvin R. Plesset, Division Neuropsychiatrist, a video of your grandfather's unaltered film from WWII*?

Anna Plesset: Sure. I made this work in 2013 as the first part of a much larger body of work that I'm currently bringing to completion. Using my studio walls as a surface on which to project, I re-filmed and re-contextualized a film my grandfather started making while he was a division psychiatrist in WWII. Sometime



after landing on the shore of Normandy in the fall of 1944, he traded a P38 pistol for a 16mm camera and subsequently documented the immediate aftermath of the war as he traveled in its wake, his furloughs in Paris and Switzerland, and the post-war period after he returned home. Over the course of the twenty-four minute film, we see scenes of bombed-out bridges, decimated cities, and troops gathering at cigarette camps disrupted by pans of bucolic landscapes spotted from moving trains, people enjoying coffee in outdoor cafes, and ducks swimming in a lake.

What's striking about the original film is the jarring way in which it oscillates between the devastation of war and the pleasures encountered in nature, culture and life. The aggressive fragmentation is a result of continuous editing over many years. I'm pretty sure creating this film was a way for my grandfather to come to terms with the coexistence of the horrors he witnessed and the pleasures he encountered.

Would you agree that your grandfather's film exposes both historical and personal trauma?

Yes, but it does so while simultaneously erasing it. The trauma inflicted on the geography, represented by unrecognizable cities and towns turned to rubble, is subverted by images of recognizable monuments and landmarks unscathed. The trauma suffered by war's victims, indicated in the film by the presence of abandoned forced labor camps and prisoner of war camps, is supplanted by images of men and women dressed in work clothes, carrying briefcases, and climbing aboard a tram as it moves past bombed-out buildings. The trauma I imagine my grandfather suffered by treating the psychological traumas of others is visually displaced by his seemingly pleasant jaunts and a joyful reunion with his family. These juxtapositions compel me to ponder the endlessness of war, trauma, and suffering and the ways they are directly and indirectly woven into the fabric of everyday life.

Can you talk about the process of translating the film from 16mm to DVD, and how this re-projection changes the original record?

When my grandfather returned to the U.S. he had the film transferred from 16 mm to 8 mm. There's a lot of missing information here, so I can only guess that doing so would have further complicated the chronology of an already poorly spliced, non-linear document. When the film was transferred to VHS, multiple reels were combined into one tape. By the time I had the film transferred from VHS to DVD, so many hands were involved that the original editing intentions have been lost. In order to establish a new point of view, I re-filmed the film as a projection on my studio wall. In this final format, a little more information is lost and the viewer encounters the film as I did—as an autonomous document of travel through geography, history, memory, time, and technology.

The next two parts of this project are based on your journey through Europe in 2011, using the aforementioned film as your guide to follow your grandfather's path. You are currently working on the second part of this work, and soon beginning the third. Can you describe them?

The second part of the project, and the largest in both scale and scope, is a 36-square-foot modular room. Working directly on the walls, I am reproducing through *trompe l'oeil* painting a variety of paraphernalia, ephemera, and images representing the disparate yet inseparable facets of my journey through France, Germany, and Switzerland. This diverse information—museum tickets, fragments of brochures, stills from my grandfather's film, screenshots, photographs, handwritten notes—appears as though provisionally tacked or taped to the wall. Structurally and visually, this piece draws on the film's logic: The conflation of disparate images forms a singular, temporally fragmented, and non-linear record; the evidence of war, trauma, suffering, and devastation coexists with their erasure and sanitization. My act of following (literally and metaphorically) my grandfather's path by way of the film is a means to understand the endlessness of war, trauma, and suffering

and how they visibly and invisibly integrate with everyday life to help shape life's meaning. What I am seeking to do is make this psychological journey tangible.

The third part of this project is a series of paintings based on my own photographs of the landscapes over which both travelogues emerged whose natural beauty belies their significance as historical sites.

Truth and fiction play an important role in your work. You often employ the 18th & 19th-century painting technique called *trompe l'oeil* (fool the eye). This technique plays with reality and illusion, blurring our understanding of what is truth. Can you unpack your purpose for employing *trompe l'oeil* and why it has become integral in your work?

As far back as Pompeii, artists have been using *trompe l'oeil* to pursue notions of truth and its relationship to fact, fiction, and mythology. The Metropolitan Museum of Art has some amazing reconstructions of villa rooms from the 1st century BC in which the real and the simulated converge and collide on the surface of the walls. The play between reality and illusion in 18th and 19th century painting centered around illusionistically painted quotidian things—postcards, notes, currency, letters—arranged together to form a non-linear and sometimes obtuse narrative about the people, culture, society, and events of the time.

Drawing on this long tradition, I employ *trompe l'oeil* as a tool to break down the distinctions between reality and illusion and explore their mutual roles in the construction of history, memory, knowledge, and perception. It has become an integral tool for me to make the familiar appear strange. While the objects and images I reproduce might initially be perceived as their real counterparts, further inspection that reveals evidence of my hand leads to a shift in perspective through defamiliarization. Playing in this visually unstable terrain is the most effective and communicative way for me to question truth as it relates to what we know about the past, the present, ourselves, and how we perceive the world around us. On a basic level, creating a reality (the work) that is comprised of illusion and multiple levels of representation is my way of representing how I see.

Looking at your installation *A Still Life*, 2013, shown at UNTITLED Gallery in New York in 2013, I am seeing parallels to Sven Spieker's notion of "the archive at play" from his book *The Big Archive*. Spieker wrote, "there is always a blind spot in our interaction with archives, and it is precisely this blind spot to which the archive at play devotes itself."¹ Do you agree that the "archive at play" could be associated with *A Still Life*? If so, why?

Absolutely. I think what Spieker suggests, that exposing this "blind spot" disrupts the archive's semblance of order, linearity, and inclusion, is very much associated with the work from this installation. As a correlative to history, the archive is as much about what's invisible as visible. The installation for *A Still Life* was a kind of grafting of the past onto the present to bring together three histories: the presumed



history of the overlooked American Impressionist Lilla Cabot Perry, the history pertaining to my time in Giverny working in Perry's former studio, and the histories we are told or not told. In content and form, this body of work is an exploration of invisibility. Given the highly illusionistic nature of the work—handmade books, photographs, Xeroxes, and found objects—an initial response that overlooks these objects based on a false presumption of their status as actual found objects, versus the handmade objects that they are, highlights the presence of this very "blind spot" Spieker writes about.

Can you tell us about the American Impressionist painter Lilla Cabot Perry, and why she became the subject in *A Still Life*? Would you agree that you are exploring issues of mythology in this work?

I first learned about Perry during my fellowship with the Terra Summer Residency Program in Giverny, France. As I was settling into my studio for the summer, I was told it once belonged to the American Impressionist Lilla Cabot Perry who moved to Giverny in the late 1880s with her husband and three daughters to be close to the American and French Impressionists. Perry was a successful and recognized artist who, along with developing a close friendship with her neighbor Monet, supported her family at times through the sale of her portraits. I was immediately struck by my discovery of Perry, whose life and work would have remained invisible to me if not for chance, and was reminded of the illusion history presents. When I returned to the U.S. after the residency and my subsequent trip through Europe following the path of my grandfather, I began recreating the objects through which my initial discovery of Perry took place.

I would argue that Perry is not the subject of this work, but rather what she symbolizes and what this work exposes: The limitations of fact and the "blind spots," to use Spieker's words, of history. Mythology is not something I actively and specifically set out to explore in this work, but I think it is an inevitable byproduct of my historical mining.

Your work seems to have obsessive qualities, particularly in your research methods. The idea of following another's life makes me think



Left: *Portrait of Lilla Painting a Portrait*, 2011-2012, oil on linen, handmade frame, nail, wire, 15 x 12 cm, courtesy of the artist. **Right:** *South Wall: Section 1*, 2012, oil and acrylic on drywall, 64 x 45 cm, courtesy of the artist.

of Jean Baudrillard's essay *Please Follow Me*, written about the piece (of the same title) by Parisian artist Sophie Calle. Calle followed a male stranger from Paris to Venice, and like a secret spy, she chronologically documented the man's actions and later exhibited her evidence as a gallery installation. Baudrillard's essay *Please Follow Me*, essentially psychoanalyzed Calle's piece. He wrote:

One must follow in order to be followed, photograph in order to be photographed, wear a mask to be unmasked, appear in order to disappear, guess one's intentions in order to have your own guessed—all of that is Venice, but it is also the most profound, symbolic requirement. One has to be discovered. All of Sophie's anguish and desire during those days in Venice turn on this violent illumination; at the same time she attempts to avoid it. When you are unmasked, everything is there.²

Does Baudrillard's essay resonate with you in terms of your following tendencies?

I've always loved this essay. Over the last few years, the act of following has become integral to my work not only during the research phase, but also throughout my studio process. This method is a kind of distancing device for me; a way to locate myself in the present through tracing the past paths of others. There's an earlier part of Baudrillard's essay during which he introduces the ritual of following that describes the way that it can be a distancing device; a way of getting outside oneself if only to see oneself more clearly: "The other's tracks are used in such a way as to distance you from yourself. You exist only in the trace of the other, but without his being aware of it; in fact, you follow your own tracks almost without knowing it yourself."

You have mentioned that Japanese artist On Kawara has been a major influence in your work. In the January 2015 issue of *Artforum*, Joan Kee wrote on the art of On Kawara, Kee observes, "Kawara's works specifically attempt to flesh out the materiality of duration. His bulky tomes are less portable than commemorative; everyday activities otherwise easily forgotten now take on the weight, if not the scale, of events."³ Does this resonate with you? With your work?

Kawara's work has influenced me tremendously: It was through learning about his date paintings that I first became drawn to time and its duration as a subject with which to reflect the past in the present and the personal in the shared. Because my work results from a combination of historical research, my own activities, and

the slowness by which it is made, markers of time across different visual and temporal registers make their way into the objects and images I produce.

With respect to Kawara and the quote you cite, three things strongly resonate with me in relation to my own work: Making material the immateriality of time and what occurs over its passage; making visible the ruptures in time's continuity, linearity, and order; and making tangible the discrepancy between what time measures and what it signifies on an individual and global scale.

Finally, in thinking more about the temporal conflation occurring throughout my work and the way in which I locate myself in the present through the past, something I read by Marshall McLuhan comes vividly to mind: "When faced with a totally new situation, we tend to always attach ourselves to the objects, to the flavor of the most recent past. We look at the present through a rear-view mirror. We march backwards into the future."

Anna Plesset is a painter based in Brooklyn. She received her MFA in painting from the Rhode Island School of Design in 2011 and has participated in numerous residencies, including the Terra Summer Residency Program in Giverny, France and the AIRspace Program at the Abrons Art Center in New York. Her work has recently been included in group exhibitions at Galerie Clemens Gunzer, Zurich, Switzerland; UNTITLED, New York; and Marlborough Chelsea, New York. Recent solo projects have been presented at the Horticultural Society of New York and UNTITLED, New York. Plesset's work has been written about in Artforum, BOMB Magazine, frieze, Modern Painters, The New York Times, and Time Out.

Leah Taylor is the Associate Curator at the Kenderdine Art Gallery/ College Art Galleries at the University of Saskatchewan. She holds an MA in History in Art from the University of Victoria, and a BFA from the University of Saskatchewan.

Notes

1. Sven Spieker, *The Big Archive: Art From Bureaucracy* (London: The MIT Press, 2008), 174.

2. Jean Baudrillard, *Sophie Calle. Suite venitienne. Jean Baudrillard. Please follow me.* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1988), 83.

3. Joan Kee, "Uncommon Knowledge: Joan Kee on the Art of On Kawara," *Artforum (International)*, January 2015.