

Photo-textual Narratives: *Double Exposures* and *Still Sane*

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Des récits photo-textuels

Empruntant le terme "récits photo-textuels" de Linda Hutcheon, ce texte analyse les doubles réseaux de signes visuels et verbaux dans deux livres des écrivaines canadiennes qui superposent un récit verbal et des photographes. Double Exposures de Diane Schoemperlen met en relief l'interruption dans les systèmes de représentation double qui accentue la prolifération connotative ce qui les rendent ambiguës comme "signes du réel." Elle travaille avec des photos de famille qu'elle avance comme des "documents," comme des preuves des "événements," pour ensuite miner les effets du réel de cette iconicité par un récit qui souligne la nécessité de l'interprétation pour déduire les "faits" si concrètement "prouvés." Cette interprétation après les événements se révèle hasardeuse, car les détours de la mémoire mélange le réel et la fiction. Still Sane par les artistes Sheila Gilhooly et Persimmon Blackridge commençait avec des textes moulés dans des corps de plâtre pour mimer les cicatrices produites par la douleur physique et psychique des pratiques médicales pour éliminer le lesbianisme. Ensuite, ces graffitis étaient photographiés et imprimés dans un livre en face des textes écrits sur le processus de "coming out," des lettres à des amies ou des fragments d'un journal, écrits à la main. La superposition retravaille les oppositions binaires entre privé/public, anormale/normale, désir/douleur pour produire une critique et une réponse à la symbolique réglée par le phallus dans un système unaire du désir et de la représentation.

Both photography (as its name asserts) and poetry can be seen as different forms of writing, one with light, the other with words. Writing, in its root meaning, suggests a violent drawing to the attention: a tearing, a scratching, an effort to bring to notice some parts of the continuous body of the world we otherwise swallow as a whole, without question. (Marlatt 92)

Visual arts, especially photography, have been used often in Canadian feminist fiction in the last decade¹. The text has become a conglomeration of images and responses, expressed through different media, constituting what Linda Hutcheon calls "photo-textual narratives" (1991, 119) and Susan Sontag calls "photo-fictions," with all possible expressions entering the text. The texts I have chosen, Diane Schoemperlen's *Double Exposures* and Persimmon Blackbridge and Sheila Gilhooly's *Still Sane*, break the boundaries of the conventional narrative, looking for new forms to tell a woman's story. In our search for new expressions, we women are searching for a form to tell our stories, to create our own images of ourselves, not only written images but also visual ones. In the process of redefining our history, all kinds of elements are needed. The "story" opens its frames to other texts, to visual ones:

Yet, still I'm saying "story." "Story" because while deconstructing the myths about us, the silence, in our writing, we're also involved in reconstructing the historically absent female subject. "Story" because in the telling, a line of narrative is woven intertextually, encompassing elements of a community, past and present. (Scott 75)

These two photofictions by women are "subversive art" after Madeleine Ouellette-Michalska's definition:

Subversive art invents forms and vehicles for the expression of what has not yet been said, revealed or acknowledged.

It *revives lost memories*: group or ethnic memories ... the memories of women ... It counters the separatist, rationalist, divisive mode of expression with a *fusional mode* in which the word still holds echoes of the voice, *an imprint of the body*, traces of the flesh. (30; emphasis added)

Photography and Writing: Memory's *Double Exposures*

In Schoemperlen's book, photos and written texts work together to establish a "double exposure" of memory. The photographs are a pretext for the writing. Photographs become a talisman for imagination, a source for speculation and fantasy. The silence of the photograph, the suppressed voices in it, are an irresistible temptation for the writer, espe-

cially for the feminist writer concerned with giving voice to the silenced, filling the gap between the actual image and its context, awakening those frozen images into life. According to Susan Sontag, "The very muteness of what is, hypothetically, comprehensible in photographs is what constitutes their attraction and provocativeness" (24).

Schoemperlen speculates about the past and present of the people in the photographs and she imagines their story. She creates a first person narrator, a woman who re-members her family's history and revises her own present life, in a mixed narration of past and present events which follows the kind of fragmented narrative photographs create. The narration is thus formed by a series of short writings, each of them accompanying a photograph. The written text is usually inspired by or deduced from the photo: sometimes the connection between them is one of association, with some specific object or theme working as the motif for both the written text and the picture.

The events in the narrative do not follow the linear time structure characteristic of the traditional (patriarchal) novel, but the discontinuous temporal line characteristic of the photographic album. The photos frame and freeze some subject, in such a way that history becomes "a set of anecdotes":

Through photographs, the world becomes a series of unrelated, freestanding particles; and history, past and present, a set of anecdotes and faits divers. It is a view of the world which denies interconnectedness, continuity, but which confers on each moment the character of a mystery. (Sontag 23)

Memory is selective: instant moments in our lives are stored like photographed images somewhere in our bodies; they are discontinuous segments of time that remain in our memory, without a context to explain them, as in the narrator's mother's memory of the Depression — "My mother's only memory from the Depression is of the first black man she'd ever seen coming to the front gate and asking for a sandwich" (21) — where there is no comment on the circumstances of the time. Precise details from memories like this one constitute the narrative thread of this family history.

Even the creation of a family album is a selective process. The album represents the history of a family; it inscribes that family in time and space, so that later generations remember their ancestors and their history. In this sense, "Through photographs, each family constructs a

portrait-chronicle of itself — a portable kit of images that bears witness to its connectedness” (Sontag 8).

The family album tells the history of a group of people, their achievements, their aging, and it is also a record of their presence in the world for a future time when they will have disappeared. Thus, the family album constructs a story, the one the creator of the album wants to leave to posterity. Marilyn Motz comments, in her study of photograph albums of American women, on the extremely subjective process of creating a family album:

Photographs do not merely reproduce reality; the photographer selects a limited scope of vision, chooses a subject, and often arranges poses, props, and clothing. The compiler of an album, in turn, selects photographs for inclusion ... Photograph albums therefore present a highly selective view of their subjects. We see many pictures of weddings, few of divorces or family fights. (65-66)

Diane Schoemperlen takes all these issues into account when she writes the text: she provides dispersed relatives, disappeared friends and brothers whose only remains are the pictures and the narrator’s memories of them. The photographs in *Double Exposures* have captured family life: birthdays, picnics, working, etc. They are documents of everyday life in a Canadian family in the span of time between the 1930’s and (probably) the 1960’s, and they serve as the basis for the narration of everyday life stories.

The narrator of the story is a young married woman, pregnant with her first child. Her memories of the past appear and disappear between narratives of the present and her dreams. Past and present are connected by similar experiences the narrator intuitively feels between herself and her mother: marriage and pregnancy are the starting point for the remembering of the past. In this process of re-construction, the narrator realizes how memory “invents” a past for oneself, in the same way the creator of a photographic album “invents” her or his history: “My past now is cast and changed in the very remembering” (9). “Truth” or “Invention” is the dichotomy at work in her memories: she cannot distinguish between “true” and “false” stories. A quotation from Margaret Atwood’s *True Stories* prefaces the book, setting the tone for the process of remembering:

The true story lies
among the other stories,

a mess of colours, like jumbled clothing
thrown off or away.

The “fiction” in her memories constitutes the building matter for this reconstruction of her family’s history, since the narrator shows herself as an unreliable source of information:

I really don’t remember my half-brother Davey. Sometimes I think I do, but my memories are only stories my mother told me long after he was dead. (71)

In this dispute between “truth” and “invention,” the photographs have also a subverting role. According to Sontag,

although works of photo-fiction ... explain less than many stories and novels, they persuade more now, because they have the *authority* of a document. Photographs ... seem, because they are taken to be pieces of reality, more authentic than extended literary narratives. (74; emphasis added)

The reader tends to believe the photographs “furnish evidence” (Sontag 5), forgetting the subjective selection the photographer makes. The photographs in *Double Exposures* do not help to distinguish “reality” from “fiction” in the narrator’s life, as they do not document the texts with the actual characters of the story. For instance, in the photographs both the narrator and her mother are identified as the same woman and the same little girl. This identification in the pictures reinforces the sense of strong connection the narrator feels with her mother.

The narrator’s trip through memory is a re-vision and dis-covering of the many mysteries hidden in her mother’s memories/stories of her past. It turns into a process of unveiling the painful experiences kept under cover because “What you don’t know won’t hurt you” (15). The narrator is looking for her roots in the past in order to explain herself in the present. Her writing is the fulfilment of her mother’s (Natalie) and Anna’s frustrated writing ambitions:

Anna, who intends to be a writer someday, is always writing things down in a notebook. Natalie writes some things down sometimes too but she doesn’t tell Anna. (25)

Her uncovering of the past provides an explanation/excuse for her mother's solitude and sorrow:

When I find out what happened to Anna, the story explains or excuses the fact that my mother doesn't seem to want or need friends any more. And after Davey's death, she will always carry about her a sense of everything having gone terribly, irrevocably, wrong. (59)

The painful experiences of losing her son and her best friend produce a feeling of remorse or guilt in Natalie which is inherited by her daughter, the narrator. This is the narrator's excuse for her own sense of guilt for not being completely fulfilled by her marriage, for hiding her deep feelings and thought, for covering her self under a disguise of "compliant wife."

I will analyze now some of the connections between photograph and text, to see how these photo-fictions are internally constructed.

The first photograph in the book shows a young man typing, that is, writing; the text beside it introduces the narrator in the process of remembering, framed in her present situation: "I am five months pregnant with my first child" (9). The following three photographs relate to her present: her marriage, her fears, her imagination; other stories — "a story about a black woman" (13) — invade her own.

A series of portraits introduces the different characters in her family: grandmother, mother, father, aunt, etc. These photographs show the family in their houses and farms, in groups of children and adults. The children represent first the narrator's parents, and later the narrator herself and her half-brother. They all reflect the passage of time in which people grow up and repeat themselves in the next generation.

These portraits and some other photographs are intended to function deceptively as "documents," proof of veracity. For instance, the text "In all the summer pictures that year, my mother is wearing that blouse" (61) appears beside a photograph of the woman I "recognize" as the mother in a blouse like the one described in the text; likewise, the text "In July they go on Sunday afternoon picnic to Cameo Lake" (55), is juxtaposed with a photograph of the family in a picnic.

Some of the texts describe the photograph beside them, and narrate the (imagined) events that happened after its taking: "A man in a black wool overcoat kneels on the bottom step, balancing a baby on one knee" (77).

The recurrent theme in the narrative, the repetition of character features and attitudes in every generation of a family, is also the theme in the last photograph and text of the book. In the text, the narrator is going to re-join her parents to show them her baby. She is already conscious of her use of disguises to defend herself from her feelings, and through this process she has also discovered her parents: "When I face them [her parents] ... I am going to understand about camouflage and they too will change back into themselves" (101). The photograph beside this text is a blurred image in which we can faintly perceive three human figures: two female and one male. The mother and the daughter/narrator are side by side in a symmetrical pose that suggests a figure reflected in a mirror; the identification between the two women is already assumed by the narrator. The figure of the father is inscribed in the mother's silhouette, as a component of her own structure. The three figures are standing in front of a car which repeats itself in a "mise en abyme," as the story repeats itself from generation to generation, passing experiences and feelings that duplicate, triplicate as the growing child inherits her parents' guilt, creates her own, and suffers that of her children. The three cars represent the three generations present in the last written text and in the whole book: the parents', the narrator's and her newborn's. In this way photographs and written texts contribute side by side to the telling of a woman's story.



**Writing the Body, Writing on the Body: Photography, Sculpture,
Writing ... and *Still Sane!***

*Still Sane*² is a series of twenty seven sculptures and texts that, captured in photographs, become a printed work: a book. In this collaborative work three women use three different artistic media to tell the story of Sheila Gilhooly's three years of seclusion in several Canadian psychiatric institutions; her illness, being a lesbian. Persimmon Blackbridge and Sheila Gilhooly created the sculptures and the narratives together, Kiku Hawkes photographed them, and many other women collaborated with their written responses to the images.

This book is a documentary in the sense that it tells a real life story; but it is also much more than that. It is a challenge and a message of hope, an encouraging announcement to other women, and a painful and disturbing slap on the face to all who remain passive while women are suffering all kinds of abuse and horror.

Still Sane is a response to the silencing women have been subjected to, and to that sense of guilt and shame that a patriarchal homophobic society makes grow in the hearts of women, especially of lesbians:

Any time we experience violence, whether it is as incest survivors, battered women, prisoners or psychiatric inmates, we are taught to believe it is our own fault and to be ashamed and silenced. Speaking out about our experiences is terrifying but necessary, and smashing through the lies that isolate us from one another is exhilarating. ("Preface")

Still Sane breaks the silence to tell Sheila's "story of defiance and survival" (back cover), and it does so in a double way: filling the absence of visual images to represent lesbians' experiences of pain and suffering in the patriarchal system, and the absence of words to tell their stories. Words and visual images become integral parts of the message; they are completely interdependent: the sculptured bodies are superimposed on the written texts, or the texts are inscribed on the figures, image and word together creating a lesbian body.

In this way, *Still Sane* not only defies the patriarchal system of psychiatric "healthcare," or the patriarchal conception of sexual life, but also the patriarchal concept of ART:

Still Sane also raises important questions about the nature of art: who gets to make it? who does it speak to? what is "appropriate" as subject matter / to whom is the artist accountable? ("Preface")

Still Sane is made possible by a feminist understanding of art, allowing female personal experience to enter the text or the visual representation, giving space to the silenced, considering our own ordinary and common life as valuable:

Still Sane takes its place within a feminist culture that makes no apology for claiming that the raw details of our ordinary lives can be the basis for the best kind of art: provocative, reassuring, beautiful, enraging. ("Preface")

This kind of art proves to be most effective when it generates a powerful response among the public; when it opens a door to discussion and dialogue. *Still Sane* is not just an exhibition of written and sculptured body experiences, but also the dialogue which emerged from the responses to these painful and disturbing images. It incorporates four articles by four women with different perspectives and political stances. *Still Sane* also includes comments written by women who visited the exhibition: entries from the Comments Book appear in a section entitled "Coming Out Crazy." Thus, the reader/viewer of the exhibition also has a space in it.

Quotations from several psychiatric reports and statistics are dispersed among the photographs, a strategy which incorporates the voice of "Authority" in this story, that is, of the psychiatric establishment. These quotations denounce the abuse of drugs, shock treatment and seclusion in the "cure" of "mental disturbances." They reveal how the patriarchal health system uses psychiatric treatment as a weapon to control those people who reject the system or do not "fit" in it: oppressed groups including people of colour, the poor, women and homosexuals.

Women are potential victims of psychiatry in a patriarchal culture that defines them as passive and obedient servants: Women are ECT's [Electro-Convulsive Treatment] primary victims because the passive state it produces is seen as desirable for women who refuse or fail to live up to their culturally-defined roles. Nor is brain damage considered to be a handicap for women being reconditioned as housewives. (*Shock Packet*, quoted in *Still Sane*)³

Still Sane defies this definition of women and encourages women to refuse to be condemned to, in Nicole Brossard's words, "the patented version of women which patriarchal marketing has made of us" (135). This is the story of a lesbian body, of the physical punishment inflicted on her because of her desire. Sheila's lesbian body is written on the pages

of the book in a double exposure. The body's experiences are written as words on a sculptured body or beside it; the sculptures are actually made from plaster molds of Sheila's own body: it is her body which is inscribed in all the sculptures, except in the piece "Coming Out: Together," where there are also other women friends' bodies. Thus her physical body is present in the visual images, her body's experiences are reflected in her words.

Most of the texts in *Still Sane* are handwritten, as a personal journal or a letter to a close friend usually are. This makes them more direct and intimate than printed characters. Sheila capitalizes or marks in bold print the words that most impressed her, that im-press her experience.

The longer texts look like journal entries, as in "Coming Out: the shrink," where Sheila tells how she discovered her lesbian desire, her first lesbian experience and her subsequent first encounter with psychiatry. Her first readings on lesbianism as she tries to get a clue about her sexuality show the destructive patriarchal concept of female homosexuality:

I read about butches and femmes and women who wanted to be men, and how they were sick and drank and ended up committing suicide.

These dark pronouncements for her future set the track of Sheila's life, and that of many other lesbian women⁴. Patriarchal homophobic society considers Sheila to be sick, thus she must be cured. The two sculptures of her body in this first piece show her confused and ambivalent feelings about her sexuality. Her words, "I was quite on edge, but happy and spinning ... even shed six or seven tears," describe the pleasure and pain of being a lesbian.

Most of the texts written on the molded body express the hurt and pain the body experiences physically when abused by drugs and electroshock, as in the "Royal Hospital" series. Experiences of physical and emotional pain are written on the body in both a literal and a literary sense. They are experiences that have left "written" traces on Sheila's body: scars. Scars that can be read, letters inscribed on her skin like hieroglyphics on a rock, hidden because of a feeling of shame. Her scars are recurrent in the sculptures, and they are the theme of the piece "The Royal Hospital: slashing." These words are written on her clay body: "There I was slashing and crying and bleeding and I guess that's why I did it."

The words written on the body often resemble graffiti, as in "The Royal Hospital: flight." They are defying, subversive, rebellious

messages calling one to break patriarchal Law, to challenge The System: “breaking windows and escaping through roofs” — words of freedom on a winged female body with a smiling face.

There are multiple recurrent images of the entrapment and objectification of the female body in patriarchy. The net and the cross fix the female body to a frame, confine her as the mental health system does with “anti-social” people. The figure of a woman trapped in a net is a very powerful image; Sheila’s body is trapped in a net of drugs that keep her immobile, unable to react, incapable of defending herself: an object to be used and abused by any man in the hospital. Her body is framed and tied to a net in “Birchwood: shock #1.” In the written text, Sheila is paralysed by the electro-shock, supposedly the remedy for her “illness”:

I told my shrink I didn’t want to be cured of being a lesbian. He said that just proved how sick I was. He said I needed shock treatment.

Framed by the patriarchal idea of “woman,” entrapped in it, there are no alternatives. The female body is reduced to an object to be used by men, touched by men, no physical nor emotional contact being allowed between women. Sheila’s body, stamped with the imperative “DO NOT TOUCH” illustrates this text in “The Royal Hospital: Rose Ann”:

And I had my arm around her, comforting her. She was my friend. But then the nurse came in and saw us and started yelling about how she was afraid that this was where our friendship would lead and did Rose Ann know I was a lesbian and how I could take advantage of her.

Break the net, escape from the oppressive patriarchal concept of womanhood, live alternatives, is the message of “Coming Out: Together.” Women’s friendship, women’s love, women’s sisterhood is the only way out for survival. In Nicole Brossard’s words,

then there is this obsession held by the overwhelming reality (patriarchy at full gallop in our lives, running after us as if on the last hunt, a final assault on our bodies as women-loving women, lesbians, suddenly forced to react, face to face with reality. The confrontation must take place.

combat:

then, this other reality, from where we begin to exist, and in which girls find themselves full of intensity, in the process of project. like

an essential force circulating among the spaces. (59)

"Coming Out: Together" integrates the voices and sculptured bodies of Sheila's women friends beside her own. Their faces are all smiling; their poses suggest pride and defiance; their words are full of energy and power; they tell of their experiences as lesbians in a hostile, misogynist, homophobic society and of the comfort and strength found in women's groups. They tell the story of their survival in this combat against patriarchy.

In the final piece, "Afterwards: scars," Sheila comes to terms with her scars and her experience at psychiatric centres. She realizes her scars were the only language her body had been forced to use in order to express her pain, otherwise silenced. She is no longer ashamed of them; they are her body's language.

I'm no longer ashamed. Now I know that I just needed to feel something to know I was alive. I think if they had let me scream instead of drugging me into numbness, I would have had no need to scream in blood and a pain I could name. Sometimes we have to do things like that to survive.

Let's hope that innovative and subversive works like *Still Sane* and *Double Exposures* serve to open new ways of expression for women so that this code of painful body language and the repression of feelings and desires is no longer necessary. These works open a space for women to tell their stories, to discuss their responses, and to collaborate with each other. Photo-fictions allow women to use multiple media to subvert and de-construct the images, both written and visual, of women offered by patriarchy, and to re-construct multiple and different female identities through their representations in art.

Notes

1. For a study of the use of photography in Canadian literature see Linda Hutcheon's "The Postmodernist Scribe: The Dynamic of Stasis of Contemporary Canadian Writing" and Lorraine York's *The Other Side of Dailiness: Photography in the works of Alice Munro, Timothy Findley, Michael Ondaatje, and Margaret Laurence*.
2. Since there is no pagination in *Still Sane*, the titles of the pieces in quotations are used for reference.

3. See Daphne Marlatt's novel *Ana Historic* for a literary example of the abuse of electro shock on housewives.
4. Photography critic Jan Zita Grover, among many others, gives a very similar account of her first readings on lesbianism in "Dykes in Context: Some Problems of Minority Representation."

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