

Monogamy

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Monogamy is something you endure. It marks a sustained condition, rather than a rational decision or a natural impulse. In the best of cases, by highlighting the idea of commitment as an institution, monogamy denaturalizes commitment even as it consolidates it.

This show builds on the memory of CCS exhibitions past. As both an exhibition venue and a school, CCS is unusual in the sense of time it conveys: unusual in that it embodies not one but two institutions—the museum and the academy—that are both associated with history and heritage, and both beset with structural amnesia.

It's particularly difficult to cultivate a collective memory in a school. Students are eager to move on. Faculty are not only overwhelmed by the yearly arrival of new faces, but are prone to move on quickly themselves. Moreover, the high degree of disappointment that is always the mark of genuine educational investigation makes it easier to forgive and forget, rather than ponder a perplexing pedagogical record.

Even in a museal context, it's easier to chase a *Zeitgeist* than to foster a *genius loci*. Here, too, disremembering comes naturally. An exhibition venue not only contends with the flows and the exhaustion that underpin the amnesia of a school, but also with the fact that an exhibition is an inherently fleeting thing. If you think education is a Sisyphian task, we suggest you try curating.

Curators have two potential *aides-mémoires*: language and photography. Both of these follow their own rules and agendas. Exhibitions offer good looks and hard cash, but neither language nor photography is interested in anything beyond that. Language, for one, is uncompromisingly beholden to its own historical baggage and formal necessities. Whether in the shape of a review or a catalogue essay, a lecture or a rumor, language will never be a faithful window to the visual—a point that is famously and passionately argued by post-structuralism, visual studies and others.

Which is why we see curators desperately clinging to the supposed purity of installation shots, now ubiquitous. Installation shots are to art what family portraits are to the nuclear family tradition: a moment of idealized harmony to be handed down through generations. Thus installation shots become a useful foil for the priorities of our show, even coming to the fore in very specific forms in individual pieces, most markedly in Byrne's *A Thing is a Hole in a Thing it is Not* (see below).

Installation shots imply that a viewfinder is what allows you to have visited an exhibition, depicting the space in a manner that cheapens the experience of moving through it. A movement, which, after all, is the sensory crux of an exhibitionary experience, the *telos* and unique selling point of a show. But installation shots also trivialize the problem of time passing. They treat exhibitions as if they're Pompeii

(Byrne), in that they lead the viewer to underestimate the challenge of historicizing an exhibition as a fleeting phenomenon.

The efforts of *Monogamy* to address the difficulty of exhibitionary memory resonate with widespread curatorial and artistic strategies of reenacting and referencing, restaging and reproducing. Our own approach, however, is particularly grim. Not only are Byrne and Pierce thoroughly familiar with the Bard College setting, having both taught here and exhibited in its venues, but also half the artworks selected have previously been installed within the very same CCS galleries.

More often than not, the said strategies of historiographic referencing amount to high-profile homage to moments from a legendary era. Alternately, they amount to costume reenactments with therapeutic subtexts. By contrast, *Monogamy* unapologetically reinstalls material that was only recently deinstalled. It attempts to minimize the spectacle of reenactment per se, in favor of a testing of the actual vehicle that carries or embodies the enactment in question; whether said vehicle is the art itself or the institution that art is tied to.

Byrne's *New Sexual Lifestyles* was previously exhibited in the 2008 CCS show *The Green Room*, curated by Maria Lind. Pierce's *Future Exhibitions* and *It's Time Man. It feels Imminent.* were featured in *Anti-Establishment*, curated in 2012 by Johanna Burton—only one exhibition ago. Correspondences between these precedents are legion. Both were curated by CCS directors. Both were used as pedagogical foils for an entire semester, using seminar rooms as projection booths. Both featured extensive work descriptions and artist statements. Both addressed collective memory as a subtheme, either of documentary strategies or institutional critique. Both were thematic group shows that aspired to take stock of a historical moment. This inventory is not meant as a criticism so much as a foregrounding of curatorial seepage as a matter of routine.

The two works by Pierce address exhibitionary memory via the respective didactic possibilities of storytelling and scenography. They spark a gratifying atmosphere of nostalgia just as they whet a politicized appetite for institutional history and its trappings. Both are now reinstalled along with nips, tucks, relocations, expansions, omissions, and cross-references to other works in the show. *New Sexual Lifestyles*, meanwhile, remains relatively faithful to its previous iteration, becoming, simultaneously, a self-referential prop, déjà-vu experience, and auratic art object.

All three reincarnated works are thus time capsules as much as art pure and simple, and are examples of multitasking, or ambidexterity, that pervade the show as a whole. It's hardly surprising that theater plays a significant role throughout this exhibition. The stage is where props and scripts can be revisited and restaged without any loss in aura or value, offering a more supple relationship to the original than contemporary art ever will.

Conversations leading to this project began as the artists were invited to teach at CCS for the fall 2011 semester. Byrne and Pierce are married and have a son. From their

perspective, this was a rare opportunity for the family to travel and work together. For the school, this was a rare opportunity to host two artists of this caliber in one fell swoop. *Monogamy*, in other words, reflects broader questions about working conditions in the arts that are surprisingly hard to address.

The resulting duo show is a relatively conservative curatorial premise that sets up a monogamous horizon of expectation—“comparisons in the work of two artists”—even as it attempts to test these very comparisons. In the words of Sarah Pierce: “Like the installation shot, a two-person show is a simple contrivance but is also how artists and artworks substantiate institutional ‘ties’. Although the artists are making a two-person show, it does not find them in collaboration. Instead, they find themselves in an institution—together (yet again). We, as artists and curators, endure in relationships we feel secured by, even if we ideologically plead against them, insofar as they are institutional in their structure. Monogamy is the practice *of* institution—we are not referring to particular buildings or even particular institutions. So while CCS is particular, it is also part of a larger system. Monogamy is what it is—more or less everywhere.”

So on the one hand, the show offers a comparative perspective on the work of two artists who have never before been professionally compared to one another. It highlights correspondences in the shape of pedagogical subtexts, historical dispositions, and a politics of display that permeate both oeuvres. For example, one recurring trope is the artist’s voice, which is especially plain to see in Byrne’s *A Thing is a Hole in a Thing it is Not* and Pierce’s *The Artist Talks*. The artist’s voice is always expected to consolidate the ties that bind the artist to the artwork, and yet both works demonstrate the complexity of this sacrosanct monogamous relationship.

On the other hand, the show does take advantage of a familiarity between Byrne and Pierce that allows for more experimentation than is usually appropriate. Like any institution, monogamy implies a degree of dedifferentiation. It highlights ideas bleeding into each other over time. To assess what this means when it comes to the work, *Future Exhibitions* and *In Repertory*, for example, are exhibited in “cannibalized” form, with the two artworks sourcing each other as material.

Again, the notion of a socially engineered condition, fostered over time, is key. Compare the term *muscle memory*. An athlete’s ability to rely on, say, a solid backswing, is the result of a deliberate dedication over time that is indeed comparable to that of a monogamist. Yet muscle memory suggests a gut feeling of natural talent, while monogamy emphasizes the politics of negotiation and the openness of artificiality.

In this case, the institutions in question are family conventions and the professional modus operandi of the contemporary art field. More precisely, we’re addressing a ground that the two phenomena share. This may appear counterintuitive, as contemporary art prides itself in ambivalence, unpredictability, and the boundless flow of new ideas and fresh faces. But rock ‘n’roll often masks a traditional mindset, whether in art or in life. (Few things exemplify this as evocatively as the legendary 1969 exhibition *When Attitudes Becomes Form*, cf. below, the discussion of Sarah Pierce’s *It’s Time Man. It*

Feels Imminent.) Rather than an attractive polymorphous coating, monogamy proposes a measure of formalized transparency. Consider how hard it is to criticize an impulse or a friendship, given that it's always a "personal" affair. While monogamy, like any institution, easily lends itself to critique.

Gerard Byrne writes: "Monogamy describes a condition, one with connotations that have become explicitly ideological since the sexual revolution and one that bears a biographical tone that, strangely, is not about personal freedom in the narcissistic sense so pervasive in contemporary free-market thought. Rather, above all else, monogamy is an opposition—a negative. It's not about freedom or pluralism. Accordingly, this is not a distinct curatorial composition, it's predicated on the aspirations of previous shows. Such is the mechanism of our concept: the tension between choice and no choice, and a critique of the relationship between choosing and curating. Artists don't 'choose' their practices, they endure them, if that's not too melodramatic."

Thus the selection of the artworks in this show is submitted to a logic beyond curatorial taste alone. Personal preference, to state the obvious, cannot ever be evacuated from the equation entirely. But the project at hand does prioritize criteria beyond the usual thumbs-up of a privileged individual (Like!), and answers to broader factors that are procedural and structural in nature. Even the mediation of the individual artworks will cross-refer wall tags previously used, in previous exhibitions of the pieces in question.

Moreover, this project is site-specifically defined by discussions at CCS Bard: discussions of professional accountability, institutional memory, and conditions of production, not to mention heated discussions about conflicts of interest in the arts. What are the differences between loyalty and social bonding? What, in the best case, can commitment mean when it comes to a collection, a pedagogy, or a curatorial signature?

Ultimately, the exhibition implies that heightening the constraints can clarify the creative leeway even if the constraints, in this case, are not thematic in nature. Monogamy, to be sure, is not the theme around which the artworks rotate. On the contrary, this project is at pains to differentiate itself from the "heliocentric" model of curating, in which artworks politely rotate around a curatorial topic of choice. Instead, monogamy has become our organizational conceit and working hypothesis.