Four teenage girls clad in bikinis and jeans stand in the middle of a suburban street. It is night time, and the theatricality of the scene reveals faces full of anguish. Who are they here, and how are we, as the audience, intended to respond? Are we to take seriously the girls' emotions, and their reality? The work of Althea Thauberger, a Vancouver-based artist working in video, addresses such diverse themes as popular culture, teenage angst and self-awareness, romantic ideals of nature, and the roles gender and spiritual belief play in forming identity. Her perspective is raw and entirely clear. Is she looking at adolescence from the viewpoint of an adult? If so, her collaborations, primarily with female youth who respond to newspaper advertisements, vehicle to fulfill the desires of the participants and of what, to such an extent? Thauberger’s success in its duality and tension, balancing an analytical eye and the melodrama that often defines adolescence, honesty and theatricality, banality and the otherworldly, artistic discernment and the lack of artifice in her untutored collaborations. Perhaps most importantly, Thauberger offers no conclusions.

The title of Thauberger’s MATRIX project, A Memory Lasts Forever, is taken from the lyrics of a song written by one of the nonprofessional female youth who worked with her to create the video installation. She auditioned twenty-five girls who responded to a casting call distributed to musical theater groups in Greater Vancouver. Four were selected, and the group met weekly for five months. In the artist’s words, “The heart of the work is in my interaction with the girls and in the fact that they are interpreting my own story.” Thauberger often starts with personal experiences, as she says, “I would hope within the specificity there could be a greater social and political implication.” The story, drawn from Thauberger’s youth and performed as a fragmented narrative with four individualized versions of the same event, involves a tragic incident that forces the adolescents to confront death. The title of Thauberger’s MATRIX project, A Memory Lasts Forever, explores adolescence as a time defined by the need to communicate and the desire for visibility. The title further locates the events within the paradigm of girlhood, reinforcing the idea of the teenage years as a time in which we are braving concomitance of duration and mystery. For example, an inaccurate sense that things will always be so or that we are led to an inability to perceive that geeks will never be geeks and that those most popular will not always reign. There is a mirroring of loss, psychological and tangible, that occurs in the free loss of youthful innocence as well as loss of the ‘per’ through accident. Loss creates an absence, and ‘those that are left must never know why it is so.’ Sometimes, consolation is sought for the very unknowing. Poet Alan Shapiro explained that the act of writing poetry after the death of his brother was, he said, “the transformation of what I learned passively into something that I could actually make.” Similarly, the girls pictured are involved in ‘active making.’

In Sitgespain [2002–03], the project that preceded A Memory Lasts Forever, Thauberger employed a similar methodology: an advertisement in a local paper seeking female singer-songwriters aged seventeen to twenty-five. She had the songs recorded professionally and then placed the women in a lush natural environment to lip synch. The camera, which remains static, captures their songs as they are sung, the lyrics as they are removed from her backpack. This simple effort is set to an a cappella soundtrack of the artist singing the words of the title. The tune is catchy and sincere, and the viewer will see both a youthful challenge to mortality and a resolve that might.

In these works, Thauberger’s role is primarily editorial. She selects the participants and the locations but the young women are free to express themselves in their actions, gestures, dress, and general self-presentation. She rigorously directed toward the subjects’ paradigm of girlhood, reinforcing the idea of the teenage years as a time in which we are barely conscious of duration and mortality. Twenty-five girls who responded to a casting call distributed to musical theater groups in Greater Vancouver. Four were selected, and the group met weekly for five months. In the artist’s words, “The heart of the work is in my interaction with the girls and in the fact that they are interpreting my own story.” Thauberger often starts with personal experiences, as she says, “I would hope within the specificity there could be a greater social and political implication.” The story, drawn from Thauberger’s youth and performed as a fragmented narrative with four individualized versions of the same event, involves a tragic incident that forces the adolescents to confront death.

The MATRIX 2 1 5 A Memory Lasts Forever

February 6 – April 10, 2005
University of California Berkeley Art Museum

April 30 – June 5, 2005
Presentation House Gallery
North Vancouver, B.C.

Althea Thauberger/MATRIX 215

Althea Thauberger

A Memory Lasts Forever

Cover


Althea Thauberger

A Memory Lasts Forever

First page
In answering a question about what is meant by the idea of spiritual art, art critic J. W. Mahoney proposed an ambivalent term, "agnostic," which means something like "both sides up" from a state of relative ignorance to relative awareness. He writes that "artists are now finding accountable to the transpersonal—not out of society, but to something larger even, more than the answering of the demands of an art world imperative to invoke the known." The work of many contemporary artists addressing spiritual issues seems to suggest a return to the personal as, among other things, an attempt to reorient the spiritual.

Thauberger asks questions regarding how light becomes the means by which people find consolation for personal tragedy, and spiritual redemption. But she herself may be subtly or not so subtly high among stereotypical elements of "enlightenment": abjection, moral confrontation, in times of trauma? Acknowledging the theatricality of her plot, she offers mutually reverential qualities, suggesting each as potentially offering solace to suggest a return to the personal as, among other things, an optimistic view of the spiritual life. The work of many contemporary artists addressing spiritual issues seems to suggest a return to the personal as, among other things, an attempt to reorient the spiritual.

Thauberger poses that religious practice, however obliquely defined, has a place in contemporary art? It is an expectant art and prayer in their mutual involvement in actions, suggesting such as potentially offering solace in times of trauma. Acknowledging the theatricality of her plot, she offers spiritual elements of "enlightenment": abjection, moral confrontation, and spiritual redemption. But she herself may be subtly or not so subtly highlighting the ways in which people find consolation for personal tragedy, and the potential such events hold for transformation. Comparable to Genesis, a term used by early Christian writers to mean those with "higher, spiritual knowledge of spiritual things," are often defined similarly to those who have an ability to see with heightened clarity. Thauberger asks questions rather than answers them. Neither confirming nor denying the role of art to effect change, hold a transformative power, or be equated with the divine is often defined similarly to those who have an ability to see with heightened clarity. Thauberger asks questions rather than answers them. Neither confirming nor denying the role of art to effect change, hold a transformative power, or be equated with the divine is.

Hedi Zuckerman Jacobson

Phyllis Wattis HARRIX CURATOR

Althea Thauberger was born in Saskatoon, Canada, in 1970. She received her B.F.A. in photography from Concordia University in Montréal in 2000, and her M.F.A. in Studio Art from the University of Victoria in 2002. She currently lives and works in Victoria, British Columbia.

Selected Exhibitions

2005
- "True Friends Stay Together" at The Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Texas
- "Emotion Pictures," Museum of Contemporary Art, Antwerp, Belgium
- "Décarie," Saidye Bronfman Centre, Montréal, Canada

2004
- "I Wanna Be a Popstar," Loop - raum für aktuelle kunst, Berlin, Germany
- "Orange," Centre d’exposition de Saint-Hyacinthe, Saint-Hyacinthe, Canada
- "Bambi," Institute of Contemporary Art, video lounge, Philadelphia, PA
- "I am a curator," Chisenhale Gallery, London, England
- "Baja to Vancouver," Seattle Art Museum, Seattle, WA; San Diego Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego, CA
- "Land of the Free," Jack Hanley Gallery, San Francisco, CA
- "I am a curator," Chisenhale Gallery, London, England
- "Emotion Pictures," Museum of Contemporary Art, Antwerp, Belgium
- "Décarie," Saidye Bronfman Centre, Montréal, Canada

2003
- "I am a curator," Chisenhale Gallery, London, England

2002
- "Althea Thauberger," Gallery 44, Mississauga, Ontario, Canada
- "True Friends Stay Together," The Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Texas
- "Emotion Pictures," Museum of Contemporary Art, Antwerp, Belgium
- "Décarie," Saidye Bronfman Centre, Montréal, Canada

1. Althea Thauberger e-mailed the author, December 12, 2004: “I am interested in the possibility that a relational capacity—a being empathetically and ethically open—can create a different form of communication as well as...”

2. Ibid., p. 17.

3. Christina M. Gillis, e-mail to Karen Bennett, December 5, 2004.


6. Christina M. Gillis, e-mail to Karen Bennett, December 5, 2004.


10. Steve Foster, "A Memory Lasts Forever," exhibition catalog, 2005; Sobey Art Award Exhibition, Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, Canada

11. Althea Thauberger, e-mail to the author, December 12, 2004: “I am interested in the possibility that a relational capacity—a being empathetically and ethically open—can create a different form of communication as well as...”


13. Steve Foster, "A Memory Lasts Forever," exhibition catalog, 2005; Sobey Art Award Exhibition, Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, Canada


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