

Does the oyster sleep?, Gallery TPW, Toronto

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[See table of contents](#)

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← *Does the oyster sleep?*, installation view, Gallery TPW, Toronto, 2017.
Photo : Toni Hafkenscheid, courtesy of TPW Gallery, Toronto

Maja Borg

↑ *Future My Love*, 2012.

Photo : Courtesy of the artist

Does the oyster sleep?

The concept of self has changed through history, in correspondence with other cultural determinants. The subjectivity demanded by today's dominant economic system—capitalism—is characterized by competitive individualism: we build our unique and separate identities through our consumption patterns. As we become increasingly aware of the limits and dangers of that system—deepening social injustice; military, commercial, and industrial destruction of planetary life—we chafe within its ideological constraints. How can we become the kinds of subjects capable of making the change we crave? Could love bind us together in struggle, within and against the unloving system that holds us? Curators Pip Day and Irmgard Emmelhainz explore this question in Gallery TPW's moving-image installation *Does the oyster sleep?*

The exhibition title is drawn from Clarice Lispector's story *Água Viva*. Through ecstatic prose, the author's metaphoric oyster affirms the pain and "diabolic joy" that comes from intimacy with others. The curators ask, in an introductory text, "Just as the oyster is torn from its root, becoming exposed and vulnerable, can love tear us away from ourselves, toward others, or toward new relationships based on care, solidarity, and communal autonomy?"

The gallery's main space facilitates that conversation through a cluster of video works of different genres—from social documentary to poetic and experimental meditations—presented as two large wall projections and on four monitors; sculptural seating arranged for viewer interaction (larger stepped bleachers and smaller benches face various directions), and two small stacks of books that inspired the curators. In acknowledgment of the physical challenges of accessing over five hours of video materials, another room, with sofa and large monitor, offers more comfortable "on demand" access.

First encountered is Silvia Gruner's large wall projection *Un Chant d'amour* (2004), an expansive remake of a section

of Jean Genet's film of the same name. For sixty minutes the camera passes slowly across two sides of a wall, focusing interchangeably on three different figures attempting to have intimate contact through a small hole. Their passionate kissing, caressing, and passing of breath and smoke through the opening express the impossible desire to merge with the other.

The 16 mm social documentary film *A Wives Tale* (Sophie Bissonnette, Martin Duckworth, and Joyce Rock, 1980) witnesses the integral role played by wives of Sudbury's Inco miners through a long strike and their own awakening as feminist and political agents. Aligned with Lispector's poetic tenor is Marguerite Duras's 1979 film *Les Mains négatives*, which tracks through early-morning Paris as the city's littered streets are cleaned by immigrant workers. A wailing violin and Duras's haunting voice-over hark back through the ages to when prehistoric man laid his pigment-coated hands upon rock in declaration of universal yearning and love. Waël Noureddine stamps *From Beirut with Love* (2009) with the sadness bound to his city of broken buildings, protests, police, guns, and hopeless friends fading into heroin. The identity of Sara Eliassen's character in *A Blank Slate* is paralyzed by gendered film history. Maja Borg's protagonist marries her longing for love to political utopia in *Future My Love*.

The divergent perspectives of these assembled works complicate the exhibition's theoretical premise, perhaps paralleling the difficulties of moving progressive goals forward.

Jill Glessing

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