

Trauma of Signification

Terms of Engagement: Averno, feldman-kiss, Stimson. 27
September to 14 December 2014, Esker Foundation, Calgary,
Alberta; 18 January to 9 March 2014, Mount St-Vincent
University Art Gallery, Halifax, Nova Scotia; 26 April to 10
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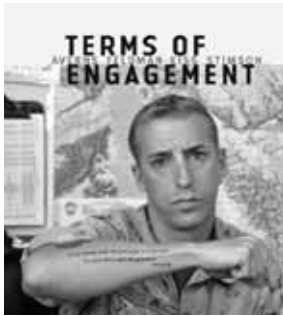
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Terms of Engagement: Averno, feldman-kiss, Stimson. 27 September to 14 December 2014, Esker Foundation, Calgary, Alberta; 18 January to 9 March 2014, Mount St-Vincent University Art Gallery, Halifax, Nova Scotia; 26 April to 10 August 2014, Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Kingston, Ontario.



Terms of Engagement: Averno, feldman-kiss, Stimson presented the work of three artists who participated in the Canadian Forces Artists Program (CFAP) between 2009 and 2011. CFAP is Canada's current official war art program, and the most recent iteration of a hundred years of official war artistry.¹ Christine Conley, the curator, carefully selected the artists and their works, established partnerships with three exhibiting institutions, and produced a series of artist talks as well as a comprehensive catalogue for this large-scale touring exhibition.² Furthermore, she organized a remarkable website to showcase the extensive video interviews she carried out with the artists.³ This major endeavour reflects the full tradition of media used in war art, with its dominance of lens-based work, interspersed with drawings, paintings, and sculptures. There are thirty-seven artworks, including large-scale installations. This dissemination of Conley's research is noteworthy since there is no systemic circulation of works produced by CFAP artists. This state of affairs curiously echoes the convoluted and fascinating history that saw the merging of private interests and public collections as the main force behind war art in Canada since its beginnings. In *Art or Memorial? The Forgotten History of Canada's War Art*, Laura Brandon examines how Max Aitken (Lord Beaverbrook) privately started to collect war art in 1916 before transferring his collection to the National Gallery in 1920 to start Canada's first official war art collection.⁴ One hundred years later, this mix of private and public is reflected in the collaborative process that took place among Conley, an independent curator, Jan Allen, director of the Agnes Etherington Art Centre, and Ingrid Jenkner, director of Mount Saint Vincent University Art Gallery, two public institutions located on university grounds, as well as with Naomi Potter, director/curator of the Esker Foundation, a private gallery.

The three artists selected their postings for complex personal, social, and global reasons. Dick Averno (featured among other CFAP artists in the fall 2014 issue of *RACAR*) was embedded with the Multinational Force and Observers (MFO), a peacekeeping organization, and travelled to Sinai, Egypt,

Palestine, and Israel. Averno chose this region because, for one thing, his father had been deployed there with the British Army in 1948. The artist nichola feldman-kiss also selected a peacekeeping operation, and was hosted by the United Nations mission that journeyed to Sudan. Her choice was marked by her ongoing personal interest in colonial histories of forced displacement and trauma. Adrian Stimson, an artist from the Siksika Nation with a lengthy military family history, worked with armed forces located in Afghanistan, including Indigenous soldiers.

In one of the catalogue's essays, "You Cannot Know: War, Art and The Unknowable Present," Kirsty Robertson examines the ways in which the exhibition and its artworks function as critical interpretations of conflicts, traumas, wars, and other disasters. As she reminds the reader, "the task of translating, commemorating or even recording conflict, however, is inherently fraught. What emerges, rather, are the slippages, the absences and the mis-(sed) translations that are in their very insufficiency a commentary on the failure of conflict."⁵

Robertson joins the many scholars and artists such as Eduardo Cadava who make evident the limits and powers of images to open up a dialogue in an ethical space. In his well-known essay "*Lapsus Imaginis: The Image in Ruins*," Cadava posits that images of disasters are a *mise en abîme* (Droste effect) of their own ruined capacity to represent and function as images.⁶ Cadava reiterates Walter Benjamin's observation that all images are about destruction and survival, but that this recursion is especially true for images of disasters/ruins/conflicts. An image's inability to coincide with its subject is what Cadava calls a "*lapsus imaginis*." In psychoanalytical terms, this phrase refers to the notion of latency, which can best be described as the distance between a traumatic event and its experience. Cadava also notes that Benjamin compares the structure of traumatic experiences with the delay built into photographic events. For Benjamin, history happens when the "past and the present moment flash into a constellation" of new meanings.⁷ What is left for us as one form of engagement is the possibility of an ethical gesture that expresses the idea of conflicted and multiple recollections.

I will interpret a few selected artworks by each artist in terms of this trauma of signification. Averno's *OCWAM (Official Canadian Wart Art Meter)*, 2010, embodies in an exemplary way the possibility of holding simultaneously conflicted positions. A large double-sided roundel printed in CADPAT (Canadian Disruptive Pattern), with a rotating compass needle, puts forward eight variations on four words: Canadian Artists Program Forces; Artists Program Forces Canadian; Canadian Forces Program Artists; Program Forces Canadian Artists; Artists Program Canadian Forces; Canadian Program Forces Artists; Forces Program Canadian Artists; and finally Canadian

Forces Artists Program. With a simple spin of the needle, the artist reveals the complicated terms of his engagement and ours.

Both Averno and Stimson offer portraits of soldiers that make obvious the failure of images to correspond with their subjects. War portraits are traditionally located within the idea of testimonial objects, but in this exhibition, to cite Wim Wenders, the work “resembles a vampire attempting to drain the image of its blood.”⁸ For example, Averno’s photograph titled *Canadian Airman Duff (MFO North Camp Sinai)*, 2009, convincingly reads, at first, as a poignant portrait of a pensive blue-eyed young man who has chosen to display his arm tattooed with a quotation by Homer: “In our mortal lives, the gods assign a proper time, for each things upon the good earth.” But the reading of this large-scale photograph displayed at the entrance of the exhibition is disrupted by its repetition in a larger grid of smaller and more prosaic portraits taken in military offices. *MFO Canadian Contingent*, 2009, reminds us that the overwhelming bureaucracy engendered by conflict is rarely seen. It is as if the function of *Canadian Airman Duff (MFO North Camp Sinai)* is to be the exception that shows war portraiture to be a photographic incongruity. With a title based on the protocol for peacekeeping, *Observe Report Verify (MFO North CAMP Sinai)*, 2009, a large-scale print on aircraft grade aluminum, operates in a similar way by making evident the instability of the war/peacekeeping rhetoric (fig. 1). It is a photograph of a sign that posts the titles of the films playing at the base: 1. *Observe and Report*; 2. *Earth*; and 3. *Incendiary*. The film titles belong awkwardly to two theatres at once; their indecision about inhabiting fiction/film or reality/war marks the unsuitability of a single meaning in the context of peacekeeping and/or war.⁹

Stimson similarly stages oppositional views in his large installation *10,000 plus*, 2011, to acknowledge Native, Inuit, and Metis soldiers who have served in the Canadian Forces. Full-length painted portraits of Master Corporal Jamie Gilman and Corporal Percy Bedard, two Indigenous soldiers, frame a series of ritualistic offerings: tobacco, sweet grass, sage, and cedar, which are displayed between the portraits on small shelves. The collapsed depth of field and lenticular distortion indicate that the paintings are remediations of photographs. Moreover, heroic in scale, the figures are painted with large impressionistic brushstrokes that do not serve analogical purposes. In short, the messiness of the facture disrupts the possibility of historical continuity with pictorial idealization. Like tricksters performing as incongruent painted figures, Stimson’s soldiers are mirroring back the staging of traditional heroism, while disrupting the tradition that, as Indigenous men, excluded them. The impossibility of reconciliation is the meaning and value of these portraits; they are depictions of their subjects’ dissocia-



Figure 1. Dick Averno, *Observe Report Verify (MFO North Camp Sinai)*, 2009. Archival digital print on aircraft grade aluminium, 61 x 91.4 cm. Courtesy the artist.

tion, or images in camouflage. They disobey normal rules and conventional behaviour and by doing so act as equalizers.¹⁰ This trickery is no passive matter, for it forces us to enlarge our notion of what history might/should (have) be(en). These portraits enact “smuggling” as a mode of embodied criticality, as indicated by Irit Rogoff and collaborator Simon Harvey:

In effect, smuggling produces subjects and objects and practices that exist in the realm of the “untaxable.” And by this I mean a great deal more than that which escapes the regimes of levied tax. The “untaxable” is a mode of eluding existing categories and being unable to operate with them and as such it is not a resistance but an embodied criticality. In its array of partial splits and internal incoherencies, the “untaxable” of smuggling provides the inhabitation of a category of refusal.¹¹

As Indigenous soldiers, therefore, Gilman and Bedard are “untaxable” subjects who have to elude existing categories to be able to operate within them; their portraits depict this embodied act of circumvention.

The historian Cadava also refers to Walter Benjamin’s notion of the “historic index,” according to which images are marked historically but do not necessarily belong to a specific time because, to be legible, historical images need to be recognizable in the present moment. Meaning is an active inscription that cannot always be performed. As if meaning were dissolving in front of one’s eyes, the image of a catastrophic event that has lost its context (what/where/how/whom) leaves the viewer with the acute experience of the failure of representation and the urgency of performing ethically. Stimson’s installation



Figure 2. Adrian Stimson, *Memory*, 2011. Acrylic on wood, lettering on wood, chair. Grid of 158 pieces, 10.2 X 8.3 cm each. Courtesy of Esker Foundation, photo: John Dean.

Memory, 2011, performs this historical amnesia (fig. 2). Even if its minimalism seems to be in opposition to *10,000 plus*, it remains its conceptual companion. *Memory* consists of a grid of one hundred fifty-eight small rectangular wood tablets with a gap at the end of the last row that implies expansion. The multiples are painted in a white acrylic wash overlaid with lettering, each designating a soldier's rank, name, and age at death (most were killed in their twenties and thirties). The modesty of the display reflects, in a way, the urgency of fast action in the theatre of war. A straight-back black chair stands in front of this minimalist grid. This familiar type of chair recalls school or any place for discipline and punishment. Stimson's *Memory* collapses the singular into the systemic; it entwines the trauma of residential school with the trauma of military regulation.

The inability for an image to correspond with an event reaches a paroxysm in feldman-kiss's large installation titled *until the story of the hunt is told by the lion/facing horror and the possibility of shame*, 2011–13. Made of sixty-one digital photographs mounted on electro-luminescent backlit media and a three-channel soundscape, including insects, birds, and barking dogs, it forces the viewer to face the horror of fragmented images of the slaughter of Sudanese at Kadak. The confrontation with a field of pulsating luminous images of scattered explosives, bodies, and their parts, makes very apparent the obscene incomprehensibility of trauma. But this is not the simple claim that trauma resides beyond the limits of representation. The massacre of Sudanese at Kadak is inexorably tied to the real beyond the materiality of its signifier. In this sense, *until the story of the hunt is told by the lion/facing horror and the possibility of*

shame opens up an ethical space beyond the symbolic order of images. The artist is reproducing for us her own encounter with the impossibility of knowing the suffering in all its horror. feldman-kiss did not witness the massacre. Her installation is based on the report of the investigative UN team with whom she visited the scene eleven days later. The artist used photographs taken by the UN crew, adding only a few of her own (tellingly, she offers an image of one of her feet on the cracked ground of the killing field). That a UN investigative member felt the urgency to give the artist unpublished materials can easily be interpreted as an act of ethical smuggling. Thus, this installation functions like trauma itself through its repetition, latency, and displacement. It is a recalibration of the UN report, which is itself an attempt to acknowledge horror after the fact. *until the story of the hunt is told by the lion/facing horror and the possibility of shame* is a recognition that compassion still excludes feeling someone else's pain, while it nevertheless painfully relates to an unbearable reality. What makes our ethical engagement possible is our ability to perceive this massacre as sharing our reality and to face horror while accepting the possibility of shame. We do so by realizing the obscenity of our inability to "truly" understand or feel someone else's trauma/death. Once more, it is a partial split, the ability to recognize internal dissonance, that leads us to this critical embodiment.

feldman-kiss's large-scale video triptych *after Africa \ "So long, Farewell"* (sunset); *after Africa \ a yard of ashes (continuous cross-dissolve)*; and *after Africa \ "Oh! How I Hate to Get Up in the Morning"* (sunrise), 2011–12, replays the nature of trauma (fig. 3). The central video presents the artist in protective gear obsessively cleaning ashes with a large broom in a dark and inhospitable closed space. Her ghostly figure relentlessly dissolves and reappears. The video is framed by two video projections of a



Figure 3. nichola feldman-kiss, *after Africa \ "So Long, Farewell"* (sunset) 2011–12. QuickTime movie: DVD loop (Part I of multi-channel HD video/audio projection), 49:07 min.

young pianist, filmed at sunset and sunrise by a dolly-mounted camera that persistently circles around the young player. Again *feldman-kiss* convincingly reinterprets the impossibility of escaping trauma by using some of its characteristics: repetition, latency, and a haunting panoptic effect, where the subject is recorded under constant surveillance.¹²

Overall, *Terms of Engagement: Averno, feldman-kiss, Stimson* poignantly expresses the relationships between trauma and signification. It highlights the responsibilities and effects associated with representing histories of conflicts in complex, thoughtful, diverse, and critical ways. It is a counterpoint to the amnesiac consciousness of our condition with its successive erasures and alterations. Critical embodiment is always timely, but of greater urgency today. As Boris Groys proposes in his discussion of the relationships between art and war, artists can, and are, critically analyzing and challenging the claims of the media-driven zeitgeist: “The art world seems to be very small, closed in, and even irrelevant compared with the power of today’s media markets. But in reality, the diversity of images circulating in the media is highly limited compared to the diversity of those circulating in contemporary art.”¹³ We are reminded that the multiplication of ambivalent representations may offer an ethical answer to our response to wars and conflicts; it may help to answer Cadava’s question, “What does it mean to assume responsibility for an image or a history—for an image of history or for the history sealed within an image?”¹⁴

Terms of Engagement offers a sharp critical skepticism, and the courage to reveal that *knowing* is not always possible in times of conflict. The artists share with their viewers that witnessing alone cannot ensure the success of the testimonial account. Rather, witnessing must include the ambivalence of “smuggling” or feeling simultaneously empowered and disempowered, knowing and unknowing. The recognition of the fundamental obscurity of straightforward understanding opens up an ethical space, a vehicle for different subjects in our world.

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Notes

- 1 National Defence, “Canadian Forces Artists Program,” <http://www.cmp-cpm.forces.gc.ca/dhh-dhp/gal/ap-pa/index-eng.asp>. For an in-depth comparative account of various official war art programs, see Dick Averno, “Calibrating Official War Art and the War on Terror,” *Terms of Engagement*, <http://www.termsofengagement.ca/texts/>, and Susan Cahill, “The Art of War: Painted Photographs and Australia’s War on Terror,” *RACAR* 39, 2 (2014): 71–87. See also John MacFarlane, ed., “The Canadian Forces Artists Program Portfolio,” *RACAR* 39, 2 (2014): 100–109.
- 2 Christine Conley and Kirsty Robertson, *Terms of Engagement: Averno, feldman-kiss, Stimson*, exh. cat. (Kingston, Halifax, and Calgary, 2014). This review is based on the exhibition at The Esker Foundation.
- 3 Christine Conley, “*Terms of Engagement*,” <http://www.termsofengagement.ca>.
- 4 Laura Brandon, *Art or Memorial? The Forgotten History of Canada’s War Art* (Calgary, 2006), 4–6.
- 5 Kirsty Robertson, “You Cannot Know: War, Art and The Unknowable Present,” *Terms of Engagement*, exh. cat., 37–43.
- 6 Eduardo Cadava, “*Lapsus Imaginis: The Image in Ruins*,” *October* 96 (2001): 35–60.
- 7 Walter Benjamin, quoted in Cadava, “*Lapsus Imaginis*,” 53.
- 8 Wim Wenders, quoted in Nicholas Bourriaud, *The Altermodern* (London, 2009), 11.
- 9 To know more about Averno’s previous work, see Dorothy Barenscott, *Dick Averno: Ambivalence Blvd.*, exh. cat., Vernon Art Gallery (Vernon, BC, 2009).
- 10 To know more about Stimson’s queering practice, see David Garneau, ed., *Adrian Stimson, The Life and Times of Buffalo Boy*, Truck Gallery (Calgary, 2014).
- 11 Irit Rogoff, “‘Smuggling’—An Embodied Criticality,” (2006), http://curatorial.net/resources/Rogoff_Smuggling.pdf.
- 12 Esker Foundation, Panel with the artists, 15 December 2014. To know more about nichola feldman-kiss’s ongoing practice with trauma, see her website, <http://www.nicholafeldmankiss.com/index.htm.html>.
- 13 Boris Groys, *Art Power* (Cambridge, 2008), 128.
- 14 Cadava, “*Lapsus Imaginis*,” 2.