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Kendra Yee and Tova Benjamin, *To Whom It May Concern*
February 17th – March 24th, 2017

“Memory is attenuated by gaps and misrecognitions, charged by desire and fantasy, and shaped by the canalizing powers of emotional investment and habit. Equally, its content is revised by subsequent knowledge, lost by forgetting and disease, recast by new shadings of recall, and remade by contestation and revelation.”¹

-Renee Baert

To Whom It May Concern, a collaborative exhibition by Tova Benjamin and Kendra Yee, explores the exchanges between meaning-making, memory, and relationship. Using an overhead projector, a series of Tova's intimate, unsent and previously confidential letters to various recipients and diary entries are projected onto a wall - in the literary and literal limelight. The audience is free to sift through, project and read the letters in the manner of a 'choose-your-own-adventure' book. The letters are presented in a reflexive conversation with a collection of art objects and illustrations devised by artist and Tova's friend, Kendra Yee. Visitors may navigate the letters by their own accord, negotiating potential narratives. Kendra has illustrated a complementary series of whimsical, quaint and fanciful scenes and sculpted bronze casted and ceramic objects that comprise visual responses to these documents; they demonstrate simultaneous nuances of fact and fiction. The exhibition is an exploration of the materialization of memory, the dynamism of social interpretation and the displacement of realities across lenses of lived experience and personal chronicles. Tova and Kendra invite the audience to undertake a speculative exploration that navigates and investigates multiple levels of significance, sentimentality, intimacy and biography. As Kendra gives material form to

Tova's words in sculpture and illustration, artifacts of her responses - at once authentic and folkloric - are made manifest.

Kendra's personified artworks expand on and articulate her own relationship with Tova. The illustrations she produces have a strange yet playful quality, enlivened by a slightly dark and nebulous sense of humour. The characters she brings to life appear both comical and domestic, and may be read as icons, symbols, and ephemeral presences in devious scenarios. As audience members read more letters and take a closer look at the artifacts, recurring themes unfold: religion, time, sexuality and sexual violence, family ties, friendship, travels and personal struggles. Featuring a fragmented and eclectic collection of sculptures and illustrations, this visual account of four years of memories highlights the intrinsic labor of translating one's personal experiences. The work of sorting out the meaningful from the mundane, further demonstrates the complexity in remembering and recounting one's story. If one pays attention, they notice that referred friends, family members, writers, and literature constitute the thread connecting Tova's stories into one narrative. Organized as a dream dictionary, Kendra's visual interjections echo the narratives and words cast across the gallery wall. Feeding on each other's beliefs and obsessions with dream symbols, ghosts, and otherworldly creatures, through their work process, these young collaborators are playing with the perspective of individual versus collective memory. Tova's letters are just as much art objects, as her words take on semiotic weight in meaning making - they are artifacts of identity, in both correspondence and expression. Lost in translation, Kendra's creatures incarnate as corporeal versions of Tova's words.

During Kendra's process of art-making, the letters were read, interpreted and responded to with limited knowledge of their origins and without any communication with the author. The audience should note: it is a mystery as to which response comes from which letter. Furthermore, although dated, the chronology of the exhibit is mysterious: the controversy of memory is paramount to the negotiation of this space.

One is left to speculate the expanse of time these conversations span. The narrative is not linear and what is considered 'past' is negotiable.

With both cerebral acuity and poetic cadence, Tova's art engages 'meaning-making' as an intimate experience through both the lenses of language and material form. Memories swim in streams of narrative. 'Fact' is fragile and 'truth' malleable in digressive streams of consciousness. What are the implications of presenting such letters as 'artifacts,' especially when many lenses of interpretive revisions are applied? Are they re-constructed, contrived, or meant to become new versions of themselves? By playing with the human desire to engage with personal stories, Tova dares the audience to pry and speculate on the personal content of each letter, satisfying the urge to peer into intimate moments of humanity. She has surrendered her control over the outcome by opening the privacy of her communications to a public gaze, while on the other hand, each typed letter has been carefully censored by hand. A great deal of *To Whom It May Concern* deals with trust - in both the relationship between the artists, and between the artists and the audience. The installation is deeply personal, as the essence and nature of letters, both sent and unsent, can be at once tragic and cathartic, enlightening and liberating. She demonstrates, in each letter, poetic transcripts of her traumas, some haunting and stern, others coy, walking lightly through the events of a day. Tova draws on religious and cultural metaphors in various styles of monologue and confession, drawing attention to her reception as friend and lover.

This dialogue is the fulcrum of an ever-expanding conversation between subjects and subjectivities: we come to know one another's' perspectives better as we contemplate the nature of communication. As listeners and as messengers, we ponder the messages we carry as the intermediaries ourselves. Ultimately, there is an intrigue in the 'detective' approach: this exhibit provides the dimensions of tactile choice, as well as uncertainty. Comprehension of sequence and order is left with an audience that is encouraged to immerse itself in the collaborative effort to solve the mystery within these stories. Whether the audience approaches these as observer, tourist or voyeur, the

temptation to enter a suspension of disbelief is real. We are given the opportunity to engage at will in a puzzle of stories of many emotional valences, subtleties of vulnerability and shades of exposé. Yet, Tova has been deliberate in her selections. This is reflected in the process of selection and engagement that is offered to us.

To Whom It May Concern is a negotiation of personal realities. As the letters are translated into art objects and visual images, the transfiguration that occurs somewhere between Tova and Kendra - and then, moreover, the audience as interpreter - speaks to a polyphony of possible dimensions produced from these relationships. Recounting the milieu of places, histories, and persons as in a diary, Tova presents articulations of her life experience as malleable in both literal and psychological projections of 'The Truth.' It may be that a multiplicity of truths and versions of these histories compete. Be that as it may, the paradigmatic sentimentality the exhibition retains its charm. The content of each letter acts as an intimate memorial - both a memento and testimonial to each recipient. The meaning of the memories and messages are thus subject to new formulations in the unfolding of the individual, social and cultural reflexivity to each person who encounters them.

-Dana Rosemarie McCool

¹ Baert, Renée. *Trames De Mémoire/Materializing Memory*. Saint-Hyacinthe: Expression, centre d'exposition de Saint-Hyacinthe, 1996, pp.18-21 (published for a touring group exhibition held at Expression, centre d'exposition de Saint-Hyacinthe, Québec, May 1 - 21, 1996). Catalogue.