

R

Stories of one life and many

Some group exhibitions start with a deceptively simple premise: not a theme or a subject, but a starting point. This show is like that. It begins with the idea of gathering a group of protagonists, a set of individuals who come forward, whether by first person accounts or because they were observed by someone else. We imagined each work in the show could reflect upon a person at the center of their own story. But who are these protagonists? And who seems to be writing their narrative: the person herself, or the artist, or somebody on the outside, like you?

Ottessa Moshfegh's novel *Death in Her Hands* begins as the protagonist finds a note on a walk in the woods with her dog: "Her name was Magda," the note says. "Nobody will ever know who killed her. It wasn't me. Here is her dead body" (1). The note doesn't accompany a dead body but like a body, it points to the absence of a life, a very specific life, a life whose consideration drives the rest of the novel. *Nine Lives* is a group exhibition that collects the residual impressions of individual protagonists: real or imagined, one protagonist per artwork, or that's what we had in mind. Like the conceit of Moshfegh's novel, the exhibition's premise unraveled in unexpected, yet welcome, ways. Different considerations were drawn into the orbit of the show as it came together, weaving new patterns into ensemble.

So that simple premise becomes more complex as the artists respond on their own terms. All of the artists subtly refract the terms of our initial invitation; within their work, each establishes their own center of gravity and unique interpretive framework. Or they may share these decisions with a collaborator (say, as they produce a tapestry), or with the person whom they

depict (in a photograph or a video or a painting)–

The sound of a drum reverberates, not to make a coherent song, necessarily, but articulating a form of presence. Sound periodically echoes through the gallery. A fleeting transmission, something that reverberate through memory and body alike. It is recorded, translated into signs, a score. An invitation to reply.

To what extent can you talk about “a life” as if it came with its own clear boundaries? Or for that matter, to what extent can you talk about a life as if it had a clear beginning and end?

A person’s life takes many forms during its own progression of years and decades. It also springs from the lives of others and is further shaped in response to its surroundings. We are touched by what came before, and we go on to touch the lives of others who might, themselves, live on for many more years after we have passed.

Sometimes exhibitions have a forensic quality. When examined, objects on view gather significance, making a single argument that the viewer puts together, like a detective or an analyst. *Nine Lives* is different. There remains a sense of accumulated impressions—hints of meaning—but there is something unstable about any final summation. The artworks on view instead endure with persistent, subjective qualities. Rather than providing evidence for an argument, or making a case, the exhibition’s qualities more closely evoke the sensation of being *with* people. In that respect, the viewer becomes another subject within this constellation of figures—another guest stopping by. To us, the show feels inherently polyvocal, presenting multiple faces, questions, and impressions that change upon reflection, over the course of the day with the light, just as a conversation changes in memory over time, remaining nevertheless saturated in feeling.

Or maybe *Nine Lives* is a bit like a dinner party filled with strong personalities where sympathies and affin-

ities start to build and amplify. One anecdote inspires another: the difficulty of a day's rehearsal, the new studio set up, and so on—how was your day, by the way? Did you hear about so-and-so? Even if the artworks contain one primary subject, they have a prismatic effect, introducing others—other people, influences, considerations, timelines, and politics—

In other ways too, there is a hint of expansion or regeneration within the exhibition, even in its very structure. One life becomes many. The title *Nine Lives* suggests nine individual stories, perhaps, and at any given moment a visitor to the show will encounter nine artists' work in the space. But there are in fact eleven artists in the show, as if the exhibition were pushing against its own implicit boundaries, letting itself expand through time as much as in space. In a darkened room, designed for projected videos, three works play in cycling sequence, meaning that the composition of the exhibition shifts in a subtle way throughout the day—

Throughout all this, an ephemeral community takes shape, tenuously establishing itself. Like the artists, each protagonist that appears within an artwork brings their own apparent set of concerns or questions, their own outside influences, friends, memories, or ethical considerations. Layers begin to accumulate, yielding nuances that may not always be on the surface of the work so as much as deep within it, lived through by the person depicted at its center.

These nuances are inextricably and reciprocally linked to larger societies and histories, too, contexts within which the protagonists—like us—are nested. In an essay collection, Sky Hopinka writes: "It's important to see oneself reflected in the society we live in. More purposefully, it's essential to see oneself reflected with potential and hope in the society we want to live in." (2) Maybe seeing yourself in society is connected to making art, telling stories, locating yourself within a trajectory, learning stories about where you come from and where you might go.

Thinking about a group exhibition as a collection of short stories leads to other questions related to storytelling itself. What's at stake in something as apparently simple as a story? What's at stake in language itself?

Joan Didion wrote: "We tell ourselves stories in order to live." This line opens the "The White Album," a landmark essay she developed between 1968 and 1978, in which she sets out to make sense of the events of the tumultuous sixties and her own experiences during this time. The stories she alludes are personal, but they also belong to and come from society. These stories, in both registers, seem unavoidable, feeding into each other and out again; they are also clearly inadequate. Didion's essay is about an author in search of a narrative and the ultimate inability to find one that feels sufficient. (3)

As this exhibition began taking shape, it was the artworks themselves that introduced questions around reading, writing, and translating—as well as transcribing, texting, tracing, singing, recording, reenacting, textiles, or transmitting. On a broader level, this same underlying current of storytelling—and all these related actions—filters perceptions of the world while informing our individual participation. Storytelling is an essential and often unconscious practice that gives each of us direction. It also knits communities together, both in the space of everyday life and historic awareness. A kind of weaving that implicates the teller and audience alike. Stories anticipate a future—like grains of rice concealed as seeds for future nourishment, future communities.

Various people appear in the works on view, but this question feels just as central: when does the author or artist become an implicit protagonist too (even as they settle their attention on somebody else)? Or when is there someone else quietly in the background, someone who is just as vital to the story as whomever is in front?

The translator, let's say, or the historian, the reader, the viewer—

In seeking out one narrative, we discover the absence of others, or we bump into countless other narratives that have been overlooked, or concealed. As Rebecca Solnit writes, “Some women get erased a little at a time, some all at once. Some reappear. Every woman who appears wrestles with the forces that would have her disappear. She struggles with the forces that would tell her story for her, or write her out of the story, the genealogy, the rights of man, the rule of law. The ability to tell your own story, in words or images, is already a victory, already a *revolt*.” (4)

The residue of erasure becomes another kind of text, words broken up on a page, they look almost like a sea upon which we peer, trying to decipher something. How to read—how to remember—impressions and incidents that don't cohere?

In the early stages of planning this exhibition, we thought about feminist films from the 1970s, like Kate Millett and Susan Kleckner's film *Three Lives* (1971), and Julia Reichert's *Growing Up Female* (1971); both productions center on women speaking to the camera and telling the stories of their life. Films like these remind us that stories have power, and as the nine women who appear in both of those films, as their own narrators, tell of their experiences, this in turn tacitly suggest an unseen volume of stories by many, many more people, too.

Not everyone gets to tell their own story. Sometimes others come by later to salvage and share what they can, or to set the record straight, or to make sense of what is missing...

In *Zong!*, M. NourbeSe Philip writes, “In the discomfort and disturbance created by the poetic text, I am forced to make meaning from apparently disparate elements—in so doing I implicate myself. The risk—of

contamination—lies in piecing together the story that cannot be told. And since we have to work to complete the events, we all become implicated in, if not contaminated by, this activity” (5). She refers to a specific legal text, the only surviving evidence, that documents a court case in which 150 captive Africans were drowned on a slave ship for insurance money. *Zong!* Takes the remaining public articles and, through a form of intervention in which no text is added, NourbeSe Philip brings forth the absence of those individuals massacred in 1871, showing how historic violence endures through the present, echoing in one’s consciousness, troubling a sense of autonomy and self-determination.

Sometimes history is with us in ways we may not explicitly recognize at all. Resmaa Menakem writes, “We’ve been trained to think of the past in terms of a written historical record. But events don’t just get written down; they get recorded and passed on in human bodies.”(6). What else can one learn from one’s own body, if you better learn how to “read it”? Can one exorcise history from the body? Can this be a way of being reborn? Or is it possible to imagine an alternate world without slavery and colonialism and their ongoing, unending aftermaths? The imagination has its own revolutionary capacity; once imagined, a picture forms, and from there a world can be built and embodied.

Some of the figures represented in this show—Ida B. Wells, for instance, or Nguyễn Thị Minh Khai, or Jami-la Bouhired—they specialized in certain forms of resistance, negotiating the constraints and the politics of their time. Much of their activity was documented, but to differing degrees; they remain elusive, spectral figures within historical archives even as they loom large in the cultural imagination. Partly the function of history, partly the function of having had to operate covertly, the full extent of their impact is immeasurable. And yet, you see how they have been metabolized, absorbed into the collective consciousness as landmarks of resistance, becoming images or ideas

over time. Their “true” presence might be eclipsed by their story in popular mythology—as figures who became symbols and were, in some cases, assimilated to other people’s ends, as artists like Marwa Arsansios and Hương Ngô recognize.

It seems vital to recognize the ambiguities involved, and the ambivalence that can arise in these efforts to try and understand the past. So too, it becomes a complicated task to think about how histories can be re-examined and the ways that they often need to be rewritten. As Isa, the protagonist in Tamar Guimarães film in *Nine Lives*, thinks about how to adapt an earlier satire of Brazilian society, she says aloud: “The temptation to rewrite passages is there, but why replace the mistakes of the past with the opinions of today that might be just as wrong? When one says ‘now’, it is the observations and mistakes of another time speaking. The audience will see that time has both passed and not passed.”

“History” is happening all around us. We are part of it but most of the time experience is more ordinary, focused not on sweeping changes but on more intimate, personal things. And so much of life remains undocumented, even for those at the heart of social movements and on the front lines of conflict and cultural change. Many small things occur in a day, too many to keep track of. Moving objects, aspirations, desires, obstacles; thinking about objects, aspirations, desires, obstacles; negotiating those same objects, aspirations, desires, obstacles. In the midst of it, we encounter others too—sometimes in harmony, sometimes at odds with one’s own purpose—as we collectively endure and make our way through the various architectures (physical, political, psychological) that others have left behind. Works in this show also capture individuals at home, reading the news, looking off into space—gentle reminders that interiors and interiorities, may be no less political.

“There is an inescapable correspondence between the architecture of a place and the character of the

community that has settled there,” writes Marwa All-Sabouni. “Our architecture tells the story of who we are. The people who construct and use a building are therefore not the only contributors to it; those who may never enter it and those who simply pass it by may equally contribute to its formation, because they are part of the social reality that led to its creation.” (7) Perhaps we inherit history, like buildings, and stories. But where is the self within that? Who am I?

The word “everyday” includes an implicit twenty-four hour span of time and also a sense of eternal progression—a forever, perhaps, divided up into familiar units. In contrast, to talk about history is to pull back the frame of view: it feels more sweeping, seen from a distance and drawing in many more people. In this way, history can feel much more abstract, in contrast to the concreteness of everyday life. And yet these two ideas (history and the everyday) aren’t disconnected. History encompasses millions or billions of everyday lives. And a single person’s life can sway the course of history—or that’s what we’re taught in school as we learn about presidents, generals, intellectuals and scientists, or resistance figures in struggles for freedom or civil rights. In the end, there is a continual movement between these different registers, between these different levels.

History extends like a sea behind us and before us. We nevertheless, intuitively or otherwise, attempt to locate ourselves within that complex extension. Negotiating identity, its shifting projections, a practice generally reserved for human encounters, until we see the ways in which the very names of things—ancient mounds, for instance—are similarly malleable, their names change between centuries and languages, even if the forms themselves remain. What is constant about the self as it moves through time and transformation?

— Karsten Lund & Caroline Picard
Curators, *Nine Lives*

Notes:

(1) Otessa Moshfegh, *Death in Her Hands*, (Penguin Press, 2020)

(2) Joan Didion, *We Tell Ourselves Stories in Order to Live*, (Everyman's Library, 2006)

(3) Sky Hopinka, *Around the Edge of Encircling the Lake* (The Green Gallery Press, 2018)

(4) Rebecca Solnit, *Men Explain Things to Me*, (Haymarket Books, 2014)

(5) M. NourbeSe Philip, *Zong!* (Weslyan University Press, 2008)

(6) Resmaa Menakem, *My Grandmothers' Hands*, (Central Recovery Press, 2017)

(7) Marwa All-Sabouni, *The Battle for Home: Memoir of a Syrian Architect*, (Thames & Hudson, 2016)