

Emotional Blackmail
 Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery¹
 May 9–July 8, 2012
 by Jon Davies

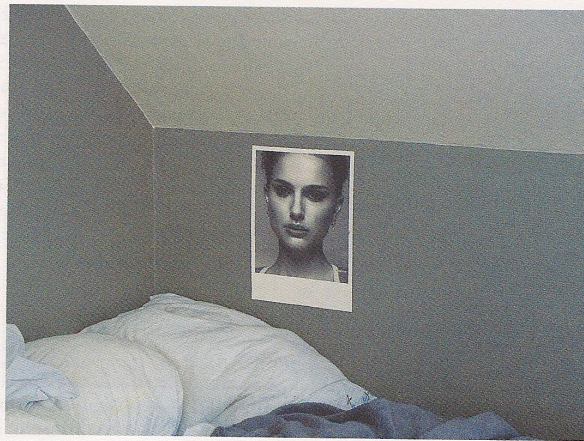
“The real alternative to cynicism is not passion but irony.”
 —Franco “Bifo” Berardi

I used to have a set limit to the amount of sincerity that I was able to handle in someone, a threshold (dubbed “earnestness”) beyond which I inevitably cringed. I am no longer so doctrinaire, but I still wince when I encounter someone who speaks without a sense of the provisionality and constructedness of their thoughts, beliefs and emotions. As a staunch ironist, I appreciate sincere feeling—provided its expression is self-conscious.

I see irony as a way of respecting the impossibility of discerning objective truth—speaking ambiguity to power, if you will—of deriving pleasure from “the infinite process of interpretation,” as Bifo puts it. And, I would argue, as a form of modesty, eschewing unmediated and cloying self-exposure in favour of the dazzling hall of mirrors of performativity. I adhere to writer Sheila Heti’s proposition, transcribed in *C 109*, that circulating myriad refracted, contradictory representations of oneself is freeing, for it protects the precious fluidity of identity: “the lie about representation is that you’re this one fixed thing, but the truth is that we’re always changing and no one can capture that...”

Sincerity purports to give it all away, where irony acknowledges complexity and uncertainty. Why should raw, unvarnished revelation be valued more greatly than the ability to critically entertain a range of possible points of view and pretenses, the desire to take advantage of the world-making power of language to open up reality’s playing field?

In *Emotional Blackmail*, Chen Tamir and Markús Þór Andrésson’s co-curated group exhibition, the curators posit “neo-sincerity” as a means of breaking free from the enduring sincerity/irony binary. Many of the “neo-sincere” works in their exhibition are compelling but I’m not convinced



Kristleifur Björnsson, detail of *The Trial*, 2009–2010, ink-jet print, 38 cm × 50 cm
 IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

that the show succeeds in establishing a new vocabulary or paradigm for thinking about these rhetorical forms today (particularly if one looks to the muddled curatorial essay or the overly simplistic irony-bashing by essayist Morgan Meis for illumination).

Bert Rodriguez’s *Weeping Monolith* (2008) and Ariel Schlesinger’s *Untitled (Lighters)* (2007) are poetically reductive—and surprisingly poignant—sculptural works that anthropomorphize simple objects, while works by Amie Siegel, Hadley+Maxwell, and Aleesa Cohene & Benny Nemerofsky Ramsay effectively explore various facets of the relationship between emotional expression and song. I am always interested in seeing what the slyly provocative Christodoulos Panayiotou is up to, but unfortunately his video of a slow-dance contest here is not only one of his weaker works but it was also lost in KWAG’s chockablock reading/reference area.

Among the five Icelandic artists in the exhibition, there were some strange choices who did not fare well next to their contemporaries: Sigga Björg Sigurðardóttir’s fantasy world of beasts—brought to life in drawings on paper and on the walls—was whimsical but tangential to the exhibition’s ambitious

thematics, while Haraldur Jónsson’s wallpaper merely listing various emotions fell completely flat. (His art therapy-style *Emograms*—drawings from the unconscious that attempt to non-symbolically figure different emotional states—at least courted hokiness in pursuit of the exhibition’s key questions.)

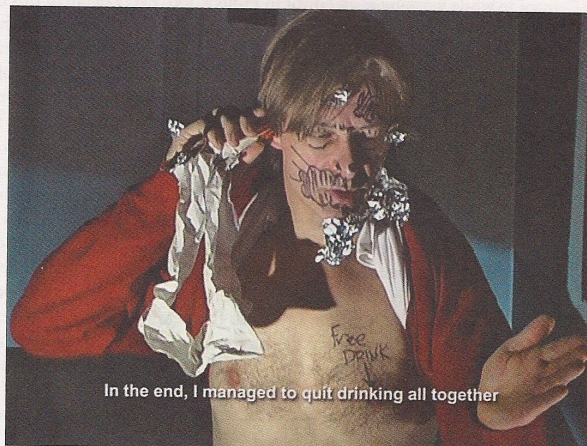
A striking work by one of the Icelandic artists, which is all the more remarkable for its simplicity, is Kristleifur Björnsson’s *The Trial* (2009–10). *The Trial* is a series of photographs documenting the artist’s private performance of hanging a found magazine photo of a tearful Natalie Portman next to his bed wherever he goes (he keeps it neatly folded in his pocket, next to his heart, every day). The gesture is ostensibly simple, but charged with the drama of celebrity fetishism, conjuring narratives of rabid paparazzi feeding the fantasies of deranged, predatory stalkers.

Kerry Downey’s lumpy, taped-together mess of letters, sketches, photos, mixtapes and other saved relationship detritus, meanwhile, is a deeply endearing ode to teen lesbian love. Björnsson’s and Downey’s fascinating records of their very different love affairs made me think of most of the work in the exhibition as “performance documentation” of one kind or another, traces of an emotional “scene” that occurred in another place and time. These intervals between an emotional scene, its representation and its transmission to the psyches contemplating the artwork are when the most lively and productive transformations and, inevitably, miscommunications, of the artist’s affect and intentions can thrive.

One problem the exhibition encounters is that the more narrative pieces communicate an emotional urgency and force that tends to overshadow the other works, even when they are of considerable interest. In some ways I preferred the original iteration of this exhibition (a prequel, perhaps?) that Tamir curated for Gallery TPW in Toronto in 2008 under the title *Life Stories*, which, not coincidentally, included only video. Part of that exhibition, too, Meiro Koizumi and Tova Mozard here both present potent videos that provide the heart and soul of *Emotional Blackmail*.

In *Emotional Blackmail*, Koizumi’s *Human Opera XXX* (2007) operates on such

Meiro Koizumi, videostill from *Human Opera XXX*, 2007, video, 17:00 min.
 IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST



a completely different level of intensity than anything else that it is overpowering. (No wonder Tamir could not let go of the work quite yet, bringing it back from *Life Stories*.) In Koizumi's video, the artist is not an enabler for earnest emotional expression but a monster. To create the work, Koizumi posted an ad looking for someone willing to share a traumatic autobiographical story for a fee. He found a gentleman who begins to narrate his personal tragedy, which revolves around his past alcoholism and the consequent disintegration of his family and loss of his daughter. Almost immediately, however, Koizumi interrupts his documentary subject to adjust the décor, lighting, composition and props to

create a more dynamic and dramatic image. He goes so far as to scrawl all over the man's face in black marker and make him speak through a bread roll stuffed in his mouth. The video ends with the storyteller—utterly debased—still sincerely trying to articulate his harrowing récit as Koizumi lurks off-set, bellowing in a terrifying voice. The video is an endurance test for the viewer as much as for the subject: an emotional snuff film.

Koizumi's video, which is both hard to watch and hard to ever fully dismiss from one's mind, dramatizes the relationship between emotional exposure and aesthetic construction as an agonistic one: here the sincere is tied up and tortured by the ironist. One could argue that art always

disciplines in this way, albeit more gently: it ultimately foils any "pure," sincere emotional expression because the designation of "art" itself acts as a frame that cannot help but mediate, put into quotation marks and add a double meaning to whatever it names. Maybe sincerity (whether neo-, post- or anything else) is but a spectre, one to which we no longer need to cling to assert the authenticity of how we think and feel. ×

Jon Davies is a writer and curator based in Toronto.

¹ *Emotional Blackmail* was organized by the Southern Alberta Art Gallery (SAAG).