

Sincerely, Warmly:
**Collected notes,
letters, reflections,
beginnings**
By Daniella Sanader

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Sincerely, Warmly screened at Vtape on Thursday, October 25, 2018. The screening featured video work by Serena Lee, Colin Campbell, Maha Maamoun, Gunilla Josephson, Alison S.M. Kobayashi, Sharlene Bamboat, and Jorge Lozano.

The program description, released 10/17/2018:

"*Sincerely, Warmly* presents a program of video work about reaching out to someone who could never respond to you. Taking the form of epistolary texts, postcards from somewhere, mis-remembered narratives, and eavesdropping tactics, the works in *Sincerely, Warmly* explore the intimacies and distances of trying to communicate. At times sweet, mournful, introspective, silly, and voyeuristic, these works release some questions into the ether, questions that ultimately go unanswered: How are you? Where have you been? Can you hear me? Do you miss me?"

What follows are collected notes and present-day reflections on this screening, the research residency that accompanied it, and the work that is still to come. This is by no means a final document.

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"There can be no fixity, no complete arrest, even in the gentlest bed of the archive. There will always be the trip of the eye as it reads, the tongue as it mouths. Dwelling in the dust, texts themselves necessarily meet bodies engaging in repetition and revision, the citing and becoming that is also choreography."

— Rebecca Schneider, *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment*, 107.

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Dear,

The first salutation, the very first words heard in this program are from Serena Lee: "Dear Mouse,". *Stretto* (2016) unfurls with yellow text overlaid on multi-lingual voices — Serena speaking French, Dutch, German; Serena speaking languages that the mouse in her apartment could never understand. "Dear Mouse, how can we live together?" she asks, as her camera meanders across her living spaces, occasionally frenetic in pace. In musical notation, a *stretto* is a device for counterpoint where a melody is repeated multiple times in quick succession, often overlapping in different tonal voices. Writing to her rodent correspondent, Serena's words layer in language yet they also accumulate intents that are equally varied,



melodically distinct yet somehow harmonious. She speculates about her co-habitant's subjectivity, perspective, stake in the shared landscape of the apartment; she articulates an elaborate (yet deliberately un-messy) plan to exterminate them; she teaches them new terminology learned at a symposium on ethics: *Practical Benefit, Reciprocity, Antagonism, Shared Worldview, Risk Management.*

Dear Mouse, Dear Mouse, Dear Mouse. Each letter piles up and she (inevitably) receives no response. However, through her epistolary process Serena builds something else: a new language for being in proximity to others, a way of speaking through the ethics of living alongside those we would not otherwise choose to, a tentative empathy found across ambivalence, antagonism, potential misunderstanding – across species divides. This mouse may not share Serena's interest in forging connection across these boundaries; frankly, I remain unsure if Serena is wholly committed to this task as well. Yet *Stretto* makes room within the *possibility* of connection without expectations or determined outcome: a vocabulary formed in the reaching-out, the opening-up, layers of misaligned melody that twist and flow forwards without a destination in mind. A hesitant salutation, a carefully outstretched hand.

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02/05/2018 –

What have you always wanted to watch? Who have you always wanted to sit with?

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Perhaps I should take a few steps back and tell you how I came to be here. It's early June 2019 as I write this; the weather has finally shifted into something that could be considered summery. I've been reflecting on my time spent on a research residency at Vtape that lasted throughout a considerable chunk of 2018 – I've been looking over old notes scrawled in notebooks or typed in .doc files on my computer.

As Serena reaches out to her furry co-habitant with no expected response; I initially entered Vtape's video collection without a clear path to follow. I had written a loose proposal about watching recorded movement within a place of (supposed) stillness: watching performing bodies amidst shelves of tapes. But I was intentionally, blissfully directionless.

Admittedly, I was emerging from a few months of work-oriented writing – deadlines and objectives and commissions – and was craving space to meander. To watch, sit, and take notes without



any intended argument or angle. I wanted to be in proximity; I wanted to learn how to be a viewer again, as if from scratch. I wanted to reorient my writing towards absorbing instead of explaining. I still want these things, I am still trying.

My notes aim to enact that process, the ongoing taking-in, sitting alongside certain artists' practices. Watching and re-watching, feeling changed by their proximity.

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Some questions from my residency proposal, submitted to Lisa Steele and dated 12/09/2017:

"What kind of movement and stillness exist within an archive of video? What can be learned/felt through watching gesture by artists in this context? Does watching performance for the camera within a video archive constitute a kind of duet between artist and researcher? What are the potentials and failures of writing as a mode of communicating that movement?"

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02/12/2018 —

Some Rules:

1) watch while taking notes, get the lay of the land.

2) watch with no note-taking, no distractions. stay put.
3) watch everything twice. no matter what you're watching, on any given day, you need to watch it twice. (do you ever really learn anything from just one read, just one glance-over? what patterns emerge upon a second, third, fourth viewing? watch it twice.)
4) an addendum, perhaps more important (or achievable) than #3; you can't start watching something without finishing it. commit, always commit. give the work that much of your time, or yourself, at least.

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Hey,

There are two frames here: the frame of the recorded video and the frame of a window in a building seen from a slight distance. A third frame is implied; the window where Colin Campbell sits, watching; a viewer and a camera. Colin's voice is heard off-camera in *I'm A Voyeur* (1974), speaking in a playful, meandering sing-song to the figure seated at a typewriter that he's observing from two windows away: "ta da dum... I'm a voyeur... I'm a voyeur... watching you type... watching you type... watching you smoke... watching you smoke... ta da da dum... don't know I'm here... you don't know I'm here... you don't know I exist..."



The figure of his attention turns to the window, and Colin's voice halts. "Do you see me? Do you see me? Watching you?" The loop tightens: Colin stares back at us from his desk and typewriter, two windows away. Colin the voyeur is observing Colin the exhibitionist, watcher and watched are one and the same. *I'm A Voyeur* heightens the dynamics between performer and audience, between myself and these tapes I watch. Seeing and being seen are mutual states, after all—co-constitutive, entangled, sometimes messier than they would otherwise seem. As he breathes loudly off-camera, speculating about his own behaviour — "You look frustrated. Boring evening? Boring evening? You smoke a lot." — a different type of mirroring emerges between himself and himself, something playful yet unnerving, uncomfortable, funny, strangely tender. And as I sit here watching a digitized file on a laptop screen, some 44 years later, I become complicit in this invasion of privacy, this duet performed between two windows. A different kind of call and response.

Perhaps these works accumulated together the way they did because they each offer something about what it means to be a viewer. It was a phrase I kept repeating — that I wanted to be taught how to be a viewer, as if from scratch — yet I was unsure how to enact this (un)learning

process. How to position my body at a desk, how to tilt my head, how to adjust my vision. How to meet each work in stride, how to take it all in.

At Vtape, for the first few weeks I was mostly watching performance for the camera and taking notes. Gradually, I let my vocabulary pull me in new directions. Letter writing came naturally, compulsively — some small shifts and then, all my viewing notes were addressed to the artists I was watching. Suddenly I was writing letters constantly; what was supposed to be a quick exercise in alternative modes of address expanded, taking up my whole residency. I was writing letters, not to each artist as they might exist in the world today, but rather to each particular moving body seen on (or off) camera, this person moving here with me in an archive of video. A letter addressed to a recorded body. What if my viewership was reframed as a gesture, a greeting, an act of reaching out to someone who could not otherwise respond to me?

03/19/2018 —

A LETTER WRITING CAMPAIGN.

Who am I writing to? An artist in the present? (No.) A person in the past made present again, a representation of a person, a gesture.



I am writing a letter. Performing (?) writing a letter.

I can't perform for the camera (or, I choose not to) but these are my modes of address. I'm sitting in an archive, an archive of video, an archive of modes of address.

A letter is a body, a pen, a piece of paper (a computer!)

A performance is a body, a movement, a camera

Who is the I of this letter, who is the you?

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05/14/2018 —

Dear Colin,

I should have known. I should have known I'd wind up here. I've taken you for granted for a while, I think.

(When will I see you again?)

—

Psst,

An abrupt change of pace — an actual conversation. (This screening's first and only



dialogue.) There's the pleasant rustle of trees in the wind and scattered birdsong; soft layers of voices in the distance, enjoying the weather.

Maha Maamoun's *Shooting Stars Remind Me of Eavesdroppers* (2013) unfolds as a conversation on a sunny day in the park. A woman speaks about proverbs and myths, of eavesdroppers and poets being cosmically barred from listening in on the truths of others. Her male counterpart admits that he would much rather eavesdrop on her than listen to her directly, and a playful quasi-argument about intimacy, trust, intrusion, and love ensues.

He insists that eavesdropping is the most intimate way to hear someone, to know someone.

She objects, wondering if he is simply romanticizing intrusion. What does listening offer that conversation cannot? What does listening offer that *viewing* cannot? Like the impossibly large separation between Serena and a mouse, the gulf of two windows that separates Colin from himself, Maha's conversing voices are grafted onto various couples at the park, filmed at a distance. Any one of them – or none of them at all – could be in the midst of this conversation. As I watch, as I listen, as I read subtitles translated from Arabic, I too am participating in a breach of privacy, I too could be punished by the cosmos for eavesdropping.

The female voice has the last word. In response to her conversation partner's comment about his eavesdropping – "or maybe you don't like my ears" – she responds, "Oh, I love your ears." This feels ambiguous; like a "but..." is hanging in the air. Yet perhaps she's also expressing a love for one's capacity to listen, a difficult connection forged through being heard. The ambient noise of the park lingers on.

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04/02/2018 –

What does it mean to intentionally reach out to someone who could never respond to you? Is it easier, cleaner somehow, to only write letters when you cannot receive an answer? What are the ethics of this stance? Am I being selfish, foreclosing the possibility of conversation, of exchange, of letting others have a voice?

Or maybe I didn't make the first move here. I am watching artist's video in an archive, after all; perhaps I'm answering the call.



Hello,

She whispers, narrates, laughs, asks, screams, sings. In Gunilla Josephson's *Hello Ingmar* (2000), a woman who may or may not be Gunilla Josephson is searching for fragments of herself throughout the filmography of Ingmar Bergman. "HELLO INGMAR. HAVE YOU SEEN ME?" What follows is a crescendo - like autobiographical narrative - which may or may not be true - of

Gunilla's relationship to the famed Swedish director, who may or may not be her father. "He put me in his films and I got lost," she explains. The video stitches original footage of Gunilla's native Sweden together with appropriated clips from Bergman's oeuvre - primarily his female actresses, with whom Bergman was known to have fraught, abusive relationships - and Gunilla searches for herself in their midst. As she reaches out to Bergman, a chorus of other voices call to her: "Are you there, Gunilla?" "Gunilla, Gunilla!"

As *Hello Ingmar* builds to its frenetic, gleeful, perhaps Freudian conclusion, Gunilla entangles herself in this sprawling filmic archive, seemingly just as willing to build new narratives within Bergman's work as she is to destroy it completely. With each "Hello!" "Hey Ingmar!" "Gunilla!!", she becomes less and less interested

in delineating truth from fiction, original from appropriation, instead revelling in the new forms of selfhood that can emerge when one submits to being lost between these opposing states.

Towards the end of *Hello Ingmar*, Gunilla provides an equally ambiguous exit strategy. "This is where I run out of the film," the text on screen reads. A young woman in a white dress is seen running through the forest: has Gunilla (the artist) exhausted her useable footage, or has Gunilla (the fiction) finally escaped her father's grasp? Maybe both are true, maybe neither.

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05/14/2018 -

Dear Serena, dear Gunilla,

Here's another fact about myself: I often feel like the best way to learn something is to write it out, word for word. Repeating sentences enough times that the curves of each letter become muscle memory.

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08/27/2018 —

What form of research is this? What mis-use of an archive? What laziness, what irresponsibleness?

Not branching out, not reading everything, not searching around for lost fragments. Not contextualizing. Staying with one source, watching it repeatedly. Reassessing it each time; your position in relation to it, where you're coming from today, your stance as a researcher.

I keep coming back to the same titles. I keep starting from the same places and learning new things.

—

Lisa has mentioned a number of times that she would notice me watching the same few titles over and over again, from my designated research desk in the corner of Vtape's office. Admittedly, at first I felt sheepish that this practice was so obvious to others, like I was visibly using this archive incorrectly, not taking full advantage of the resources. Yet Gunilla's work reminds me that there's no "correct" way to sit alongside the work of others. What can happen when you intentionally mis-use an archive? As notes built up around watched and re-watched titles, is that something like a conversation, a correspondence?

I certainly felt grounded every time I returned to Vtape after a few weeks away, resubmitting to



a title's familiar rhythms and abruptly brushing up against new facets, strange details I hadn't noticed before.

There's a lot to be learned in a repeated gesture, and when watching artist's video I don't feel any more like an authority after twenty viewings than I did after two. Perhaps being a viewer means being a perpetual amateur, being constantly willing to be met with something different, to be confronted with how little you understand. I adore this feeling.

Hi,

There's the space between two windows in two neighbouring buildings, between two species in a shared apartment, between an artist and a researcher, between your voice and my ears in the park. The space of an archive. The acres of space between a lost letter and its finder; between intended readers and happenstance ones. In *From Alex to Alex* (2006), Alison S.M. Kobayashi dramatizes a letter she found on a QEW overpass in Mississauga in the fall of 2003; a tentative, yearning, carefully-wrought letter from Alex to his classmate Alex. Alex has just celebrated his fourteenth birthday, he's reaching out to Alex through their mutual friend Vicky. He's offering



to give him head, or they can just hang out, or whatever. He's getting older and he's got a lot going through his head at the moment; he knows he's way more gay than straight. He admits that he's been up late at night, thinking about Alex, but is quick to diffuse his feelings: "yuk! romance... LOL."

In an assortment of wigs, New Balance sneakers, and baby-blue polos, Alison plays every character in this unfolding drama: distracted moms, school secretaries, accomplice Vicky, Alex's homophobic dirtbag older brother. She embodies both Alexes, who are equal parts curious, melancholic, awkward, desiring. Like the divide between Colin and himself in *I'm A Voyeur*, these two Alex-Alisons playfully muddle the gap between the object and subject of desire; between writer and reader, sender and recipient. Between who is seeing and who is being seen. As her access to this letter would surely have been denied by either Alex, Alison's performative self-staging implicates her stance as a reader in a different way: she takes it into her body, absorbs its rhythms, she recognizes the complexities of this epistolary world and she inhabits it with boundless care, curiosity, and tenderness.



I'll never know if Alex and Alex got together, if Alex gave Alex head. But with Alison, as with Gunilla, Colin, Maha, Serena, there are infinite worlds in the reaching-out, the possibility of connection across impossible divides. There's plenty of space for us here.

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03/19/2019 —

Dear everyone,

Am I writing these letters to you because I don't know if I have a voice? Is it easier to emulate you if I'm addressing you? I do wonder sometimes if I'm one of those people that calibrates myself quietly to the person I'm talking to — I absorb your qualities, your tics, your moods and I repeat them back. It's a social anxiety thing probably (a heavy Gemini sensibility?) an effort to be likeable.

But on the other hand, I think anyone should be altered slightly when they watch your work, when they take you in. As a viewer, I am allowing myself to be changed, even in a small way. Who's to say that this is a position of weakness?

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To,

To as in towards, as in moving in the direction of. Like Gunilla's work, Sharlene Bamboat's *The Wind Sleeps Standing Up* (2016) positions itself within the uneasy divide between truth and fiction, accumulating anecdotes, memories, self-reflections, and falsehoods in equal measure. As grainy digital footage of Pakistan crackles quietly on-screen, Sharlene impassively lists a series of personal confessions, some mundane and others quite large: "I've cried more on German trains than any others. I don't like overripe bananas. I feel most ecstatic when I'm dancing. I love it when food is spicy enough to burn my tongue." What seems at first intimate and vulnerable begins to crumble under the cumulative weight of her words: like a prolonged game of Two Truths and a Lie, how much of this can be real? Does it matter? Do we really need verifiable truth in order to know someone?

The trope of the Unreliable Narrator lingers in the wings of Sharlene's work, yet she reframes what this "unreliability" can offer its listeners. These are not untrustworthy narrative voices to be proven right or wrong; rather, in negotiating the flows between memory and digital images — two equally imperfect forms of representation — Sharlene builds a dense self-portrait nourished by its own unknowing. As



a viewer, I'm left within this state as well:
absurdly, sweetly, wistfully unsure.

Later, an iPhone sits in the frame and her finger hits play: it's shaky handheld footage of Karachi as seen from a moving car. Sharlene begins the absurd exercise of describing everything she sees on the small screen – passing cars, buildings, public advertisements, city monuments. However, she thwarts her own attempts at neutrality by meandering off-course: sharing rushed snippets of memories, speculating over quasi-familiar details, making small jokes to herself. It's an imperfect postcard from a place both real and remembered, both true and false.

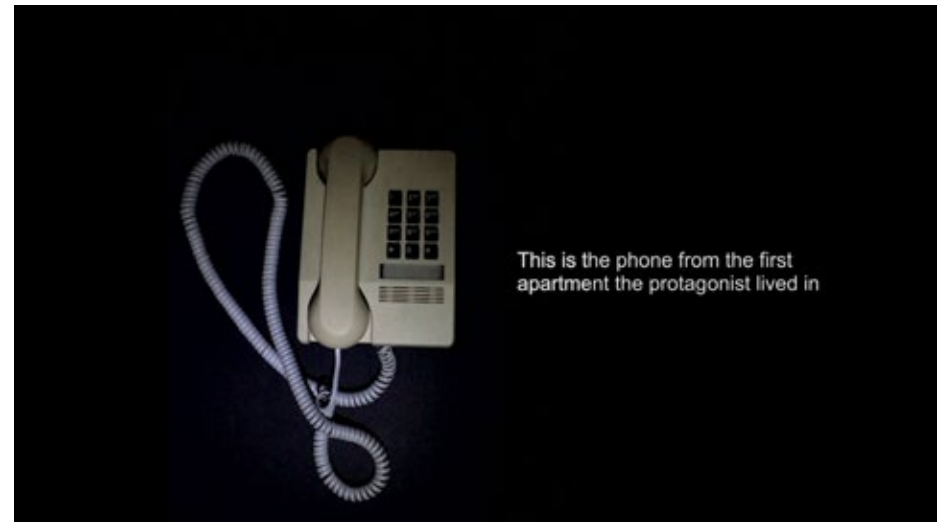
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08/27/2019 –

Dear everyone,

I guess I'm just looking for a different way to write in your direction. To access you without that common performance of curatorial clarity, that declarative voice. (Although, I'm definitely performing something.) To carve out a different place to ask you some questions. To feel closer to you, to find an intimacy. To answer your call.

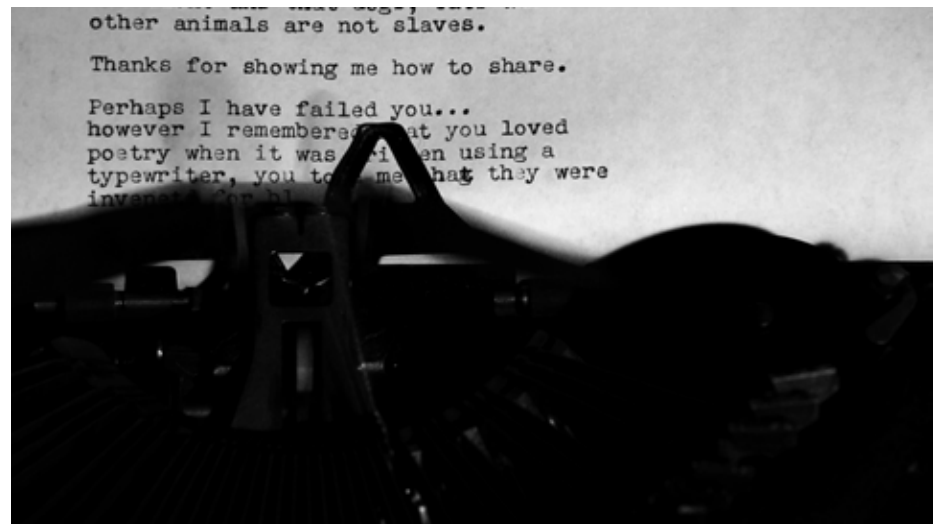
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Dear,

We've returned to where we started, the first salutation. *Dear*, this time it's typed on white paper with the nostalgic clack-clack of an antique typewriter. Jorge Lozano's *the end of type (writers)* (2016) is short and deceptively simple. "Dear Mom," he begins, "Thanks for teaching me not to be selfish..." Jorge's letter to his mother is one of gratitude, for raising him to value empathy but also for building his political consciousness.

Watching Jorge compose his letter, the stutters and adjustments of his typewritten text begin to take on their own cadence. Each pause, each new line, each adjustment for a typo, like patterns of speech. The farther he gets down the page, his sentences unfurl with greater momentum, and he acknowledges that he's clumsy on this old-fashioned machine. He writes, "I bought this one at a rummage sale," before his letter takes an abrupt turn. "O Mom obviously you do not know what a rummage sale is... I am so **sorry**." He goes over these letters - **s o r r y** - three times for added emphasis. "Mom I am so stupid I forgot that you do not speak English..." The letter trails off and he removes the page; the typewriter is left empty.



the end of type (writers) speaks to the linguistic divide that can form between generations in diasporic communities. Yet, while Jorge expresses frustration at the absurdity of his own exercise, it doesn't come across as futile. As he articulates the care with which his mother taught him to move through the world, it becomes clear: just because this message cannot be received, doesn't mean it isn't worth sending.

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I should confess: I never intended to curate a screening. Nor did I intend to branch away from my initial proposed framework of watching performance for the camera. But as I meandered through Vtape's collection, certain things stuck to me — there were certain titles that I needed to keep close by. Dear Serena, Colin, Maha, Gunilla, Alison, Sharlene, Jorge. That's how the *Sincerely, Warmly* program came together, that's how I find myself here, tonight, nearing the end of this extended love letter. There are connections between these works that I feel in my body, yet I still can't put into words. I am learning that there are still places where being a viewer exceeds being a writer, no matter how much I try.

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08/27/2019 —

What if research is mostly just turning your body towards something?

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I have no closing statements, no goodbyes, no sincerelys. There's more work to be done, I have more letters to write. I'll be in touch soon.

Hello,

Dear,

To,

Hi,

■



CONTRIBUTOR BIO

Daniella Sanader is a writer and reader who lives in Toronto. Her reviews, essays, speculations, and oblique texts have been commissioned by a variety of publications, galleries, and artist-run spaces across Canada. She has curated projects for Vtape, Oakville Galleries, Open Studio, LOMAA, and Gallery TPW. In 2018, she was a participant in the Banff Centre's Critical Art Writing Ensemble. She currently works as the Program and Publications Coordinator at Gallery TPW.



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