

Don't Forget to Call...

Interviewing Nelly Matorina at Union Gallery

By Leyla Chisamore

Don't Forget to Call is a 7-channel video installation exploring mediated forms of communication. The installation is composed of seven 'calls' to my grandparents and other deceased ancestors, some of whom I've never met or spoken to. Throughout their lives, most of our communication was mediated through calling cards and, more recently, calling home phone numbers through Skype. This installation extends my familiarity with mediation into another realm: is a call to the afterlife that much further than a call over the internet?

First, thank you for being willing to interview about your work!

Your current exhibition, *Don't Forget to Call...*, is a 7-channel video installation in which you call grandparents and other deceased ancestors, two of whom you've never met. With reaching back so far, how did you choose relatives to reach out?

There were a few relatives who had been on my mind at the time. Last summer, I made a few big trips to meet some relatives for the very first time. Their parents/spouses who had passed kept coming up in conversations, so it felt like the right moment in time to address them.

Yes, you say things like "he looks like you", etc.

Exactly. I felt like I had gotten little glimpses into who they were.

In order to experience the show, viewers have to walk around the room and engage with a particular television. It is a small space at that. More and more I find galleries are exhibiting artist works with primarily flat screens. Your show uses older televisions and so we walk *around*, rather being surround *by*. Is that intentional?

Absolutely. I created the videos sequentially, one call after another, so I wanted to preserve each video as a discrete experience that you need to walk towards. I decided to play the sound from all of the calls simultaneously in order to preserve the energy of multiple events occurring all at the same time.

It definitely comes out when you have to go through and decipher which sound matches with which subtitle.

For sure.

And notably, each video is also in produced in your home, using the same altar and perspective. That personal engagement seems even more so with each television having a distinct type and video quality (grain, colour, etc.)...

One of the neat things about using older, imperfect TVs is that they show different qualities of the same video, mostly because of different kinds of distortion. In this work, because the videos are so visually similar, I really liked how the history of each TV seeped into the image. This is especially true for the three older TVs, two of which I had found on the street. One of them is marked as 1989 and the other 1994, but aside from that I don't have much context for where they came from.

It really comes out in the show. You're going through your personal archives in a familial way, but also your materials.

Exactly. I like to explore personal archives within domestic spaces, the same place where you would display family photographs or mementos.

And coming to the relationships themselves, talking about that: You live quite far from family and talk about migration as one of the central themes of your practice. When communication is mediated by technology, what impact did you find it had on the relationships themselves?

I think one of the main things that you lose is a kind of everyday communication, the small things that don't feel important enough to say if you only talk every once in a while. Sometimes it can feel like I'm circulating the same 30 words over and over – yes, I'm well, yes I'm healthy, thank you for your wishes for my future. When the telephone informs your entire relationship over 10 or 20 years, you start to notice small things like their voice aging or small changes in mannerisms.

There's also a lot of ambiguity present when calling a landline. If the one you're trying to reach doesn't pick up, it can mean that they went or for groceries, or are sleeping, or are feeling unwell. The act of not picking up just represents absence, but there's no way to know what that absence looks like.

When you say in the videos, “remember when I called you on the internet” and you mention Skype. Do you mean phoning those landlines, so they never had the face to face Skype calls?

Never, yeah... my family is always worried that I'm spending all my money calling them internationally, so they always try to keep their conversations to three or four minutes. I have to keep saying, "It's okay, I'm calling you over the internet" so that they won't hang up.

And in those calls and a lot of your work is in your native Russian, translated with subtitles. In your videos you speak in the present tense and offer “love and kisses”, updates on living family, and reflections on your own memories with them. You also mentioned intentionally reserving the more personal aspects untranslated. It's very personal. If I can ask, is that process of making this art more for them or yourself? How do you see that fitting into your practice?

I originally created the videos from this piece as a way to tell my relatives that I have been thinking about them, and to extend those passing thoughts into a complete address. After making the calls, I felt a really strong connection to all of my relatives at the same time, which I realized would have never been geographically possible when they were alive. That feeling was really unexpected.

It starts off personal, and then eventually takes the shape of something conceptual. There's a lot of distance between the feeling of making each call at home, and installing the seven calls to happen simultaneously as a continuous transmission.

It really comes across in the space too. You feel emotionally struck spending time reach each of the work. The first one in particular where you say “I'm starting with you”, that felt very poignant. And I guess you in part answered it, but I've noticed your work combines the traditional and contemporary in a lot ways. Old televisions/new video, ancestors/descendants, and ritual mediated by technology. How do you see yourself carrying traditional onward through these works?

Absolutely. One of the concepts I'm exploring is how to feel connected to our ancestors across a diaspora. If religious traditions and languages aren't passed down, what can we do about that? Is there a way to connect to those traditions if we don't have access to the physical words and materials?

This is relevant in *Don't Forget to Call*, because I don't have access to the specific Muslim prayers that my relatives would have been familiar with, such as the prayers for remembering the dead. It feels like I'm trying to fill the space where tradition would be.

A tradition you're starting, in a way. On that note, your other works have explored communication, ritual, prayer. I know your upcoming show at Modern Fuel next summer looks at those in some depth. Does this installation at Union Gallery reflect that process for you or connect to that show at all?

I do think of them as a series of works exploring the themes you mentioned, but the Modern Fuel show focuses more specifically on language. I examine extracts from my grandmother's journals, which are written in a Cyrillic script but in an unknown language to me. During the Soviet Union, people had to learn a lot of different languages to survive in different communities. A lot of my family immigrated to Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, so had to learn Uzbek, Kazakh, and Russian, even though their native language was Tatarian. It was common to write one language in another script or mix together two or three languages. There are all these melds of languages that are specific to that point in historic time, and impossible to pass on or for others to decipher.

And it's a process of unravelling for you, if it's one that can be unravelled at all.

Absolutely.

Are there other works in this series we should be looking forward to perhaps?

Um, not sure yet. [laughs] I had a two-channel video installed at Unit 115 in March, which I also think of as part of this series. But I think the Modern Fuel show will be the last in this particular series.

Well thank you for producing and sharing your art with us, Nelly!

Of course. Thank you so much for having me.

You can catch *Don't Forget to Call...* on display at Union Gallery from May 19th until August 4th.

Nelly Matorina is a Latvian-born video artist currently based in Kingston, Canada. Her work explores the experience of being a post-Soviet immigrant in North America, with respect to traditions, language, and oral history. Her work has been screened at Square Pegs, Reelout Queer Film Festival, and the Artel. Upcoming exhibitions include *Modern Fuel*.

Leyla Chisamore is the 2018 summer student gallery assistant at the Union Gallery. She is also currently a BA (Honours) candidate at Queen's University (History & Art History), with an ongoing certificate program in Gender and Sexual Diversity. Her areas of interest include gender, sexual, and witchcraft histories in the medieval/early modern periods, as well as contemporary feminist art and art historical practice.

The Union Gallery is located on the first floor of Stauffer Library at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario. Stauffer Library is located on the corner of University Avenue and Union Street on Queen's University campus. The building is wheelchair accessible. It is a public gallery open five days and admission is free.