

This essay accompanies the exhibition Linda Duvall: *The Toss*
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Linda Duvall – *The Toss*

by Gabrielle Moser

You hear Linda Duvall's latest installation, *The Toss* (2012), before you see it. Emanating from the hallway of the gallery are the sounds of a female voice grunting and panting from exertion. As you listen closer, more details become audible. Occasional nervous laughter punctuates the sounds of strain, as does a series of soft thuds, recalling the sudden movement of bodies that characterizes physical exercise. Though these are not the sounds of panic, they are immediately arresting, calling to mind the kinds of noises a person who is executing a focused but straining task might emit: the vocal expressions you imagine were produced by Sisyphus as he repetitively pushed a boulder up a mountainside, but also the ones you can't help but make when trying to open a tightly sealed jar of pickles.

This delicate balancing act of invoking the epic alongside the absurdly banal is typical of Duvall's practice. Though she largely works in video, it is the social encounters the artist sets in motion to produce her artworks that create this tension between familiar, grand narratives and the everyday. Fundamentally collaborative, her works often connect experts from fields outside of the visual arts with strangers and the general public, establishing the parameters in which they will work and using video and audio recordings to take sociological field notes of their encounters. But while Duvall's earlier works deconstruct the way that others' identities are formed through social constructs and the conventions of language, *The Toss* moves towards a more auto-ethnographic approach. It is the first work in which Duvall appears



The Toss, 2012. Video still, detail. Camera: Jason Ebank.

on-screen, as the main subject of the videos, while its structure self-reflexively questions the artist's position in her interactions with her collaborators.

The Toss, a new installation that incorporates a sound work with two video projections, follows Duvall as she enlists the help of six instructors to teach her how to perform “a toss,” a kind of self-defense tactic that involves flipping an opponent to the ground. Inspired by her experience of being “tossed” by police several years ago, Duvall sought out various specialists—including a children’s karate instructor, the owner of a women’s boxing club, a Hollywood stunt choreographer, a kick-boxing coach and a pair of women’s self-defense trainers—who could teach her a specific way of performing the toss on others, starting with the experts themselves.¹ Duvall thinks of the project as a strategy of replacing the image bank of her original experience of being the “tossee”—a virtual archive of recollections and video clips of her being thrown to the ground that has gained significance through repeated playback, both psychically and on her hometown’s news channel, which showed the clip several times a day to advertise their news programming—with images of her own creation in which she is the “tosser.”² These new representations of the toss are not independently created, however, but instead

rely on the participation of others for their production. The trainers Duvall hires are integral to the project’s subject matter, while the camera crews that document the process each bring particular aesthetic conventions to the way they represent her practicing and performing the toss.

The audio track that opens the exhibition is another element of this documentation, and in fact replays the sounds Duvall makes as she prepares and first attempts to toss her various teachers. Recorded through a lapel microphone, the soundtrack purposefully obscures her teachers’ verbal instructions and instead emphasizes the visceral and ambiguous nature of the noises Duvall unconsciously produces while mastering her new maneuvers. Much like the multiple meanings of the word Duvall employs as the title for her work, which can imply physical violence (to be tossed around by the waves), destruction (to toss something away), or much subtler versions of unease (to toss and turn in bed), the audio track’s ambiguity operates as a framing device for the rest of the exhibition, immediately raising questions about the authenticity of the social interactions we are about to encounter. While *The Toss* includes very real depictions of physical struggle, it also incorporates highly manipulated scenes that draw on the strategies



The Toss, 2012. Video still, detail. Camera: Clark Ferguson.

of conceptual art and on the tropes of popular film and television programs, all carefully edited together to interrogate how we understand, identify with and learn from narratives of trauma, learning and care.

These are themes that Duvall has probed in her earlier works, projects that focused on her role as mediator in representing the lives and stories of others. In *Where were the Mothers?* (2009), Duvall paired professional musicians with people who had accessed the shelter system, found themselves incarcerated, lived or worked on the street, or dealt with addiction. Each musician-subject pair was asked to work together to write, produce and record a song about the subject's mother. The resulting songs are moving and personal, even as they follow the clichéd structures of tender country ballads or boisterous rock anthems. Though an album of songs resulted, *Where were the Mothers?* is most compelling for the complex video narrative Duvall weaved as the instigator, documentarian and editor of the project. The final video installation combines footage of each pair recording their compositions with moments of negotiation and social strain between the collaborators, critically analyzing the ethical obligations at stake when professionals attempt to represent stories that are not their own. Exchanges of support, encouragement and enthusi-

asm are depicted in the videos, but these are shadowed by moments of coercion, resistance and resentment.

The Toss charts a similar trajectory, bringing together familiar narratives of struggle and self-realization, but imbuing them with affective force through Duvall's strategies of framing, replaying and editing. In the main space of the gallery, for instance, the viewer is offered two very different narratives of Duvall mastering the toss. In the first, a video montage depicts the artist's step-by-step learning process with her instructors. Long takes, presented without sound, show Duvall in the various learning environments where she trained. Wearing an unofficial uniform of a long shirt over black tights (the shirt appears in different hues in each space to distinguish the instructors' approaches), the artist rarely acknowledges the camera, lending the video the formal conventions of a documentary. Unlike a documentary, however, no voiceover or interview footage is used to structure the film's narrative. Instead, intertitles divide the clips into sections that chart the practice sessions' level of physical interaction, beginning with the artist standing awkwardly in the space; then performing small, warm-up movements; next, watching the instructors' expressive gestures model the way both they and Duvall will move in the lead-up to the toss; and eventually



The Toss, 2012. Video still, detail. Camera: Clark Ferguson.

leading to “repeat-after-me” type actions that culminate in scenes of Duvall physically grappling with her instructors. This carefully organized, almost formalist arrangement of human movement borrows from the conventions of essay outlines, scriptwriting and legal documents, and underscores the structural similarities in the different instructors’ approaches to the learning process.

In this way, this version of *The Toss* draws on the aesthetic strategies, as well as the humour and sociological rigour, of conceptual art. In particular, Duvall’s editing choices recall the step-by-step format of Adrian Piper’s *Funk Lessons* (1983-85), which saw Piper teach her audience of students to “get down and party together” by demonstrating a set of absurd and isolated movements (such as shrugging their shoulders and nodding their heads at the same time). Duvall’s interactions with her instructors also bring to mind Martin Kersels’s *Tossing a Friend* (1996), a series of colour photographs documenting Kersels executing a kind of trust game with his friends where he literally launched six of them into the air multiple times.³ In both these projects, the artists were positioned as a kind of sociologist-turned-pedagogue, individuals who were uniquely positioned to observe and intervene in social relations, creating lessons or interruptions, and documenting the results with a camera. Duvall,

by breaking down her interactions with the experts into formal categories that mimic these conceptual works, presents the action of tossing another person as one that is instructional and rational, at a remove from the violence and arbitrariness with which she was originally tossed. (The work’s affective force perhaps resides in the moment where the viewer, watching Duvall perfect the toss, imagines a similar training scenario, in a similar environment, where police recruits are also instructed to toss.) The video’s pedagogical format also assumes a diverse audience of auto-didacts who might find this knowledge useful in their own lives and who could ostensibly use these steps to master and perform a toss on others.

In many ways, *The Toss* presents us with an alternative model of care; not the schmaltzy, self-help kind of care that we are all-too-familiar with from reality television and motivational best-sellers, which charts a clear path from individual victimhood to self-realization. Rather, Duvall’s project demonstrates an untidy kind of care that emerges through an uncomfortable and even violent pedagogical encounter with others, depicted here through the artist’s vacillations between moments of mastery and helplessness that often leave her radically vulnerable to the actions of her instructors.



The Toss, 2012. Video still, detail. Camera: Ken Hama.

This complex experience of working with and learning from others, which is not always immediately reassuring, but sometimes difficult, protracted and interrupted, is the condition pedagogical theorist Deborah Britzman says attends both learning and care. Drawing on the ideas of psychoanalyst Melanie Klein, Britzman proposes that experiences of care are uncomfortable because “care itself is the advocacy of human dependency as the foundation of life, transience, and its vulnerability.”⁴ According to Britzman, because accepting care necessarily involves recognizing the limits of autonomy and acknowledging our dependency on others, it is always accompanied by a fear of losing the other. This is why experiences of learning and care are not easy, but rather “provoke a great deal of resentment, guilt, and love.”⁵ The humour and playfulness, as well as the traces of fear and struggle, that appear in Duvall’s depiction of learning the toss recall this complicated experience of care that Britzman describes, while the editing and framing strategies that are used to present *The Toss* mirror care’s complex temporality. As Britzman observes, care, much like trauma and learning, always seems latent, as though it comes too early or too late to be fully useful.⁶

If this first version of *The Toss* works as the project’s narrative exposition, introducing viewers to the compli-

cated dynamics at play between Duvall and her instructors, then the second video serves to expand on this narrative, entering the speculative future. Literally projected on the other side of the screen that displays the first video, this second account of Duvall mastering the toss unsettles the authenticity of the exhibition’s introductory audio track and the straightforward presentation of the practice sessions, making it unclear which is the “real” story of *The Toss*.

In this version, the viewer is presented with six dramatic episodes, complete with cinematic musical scores, that follow Duvall as she walks through sites of what she calls “perceived vulnerability”—the back alleys, wooded paths and abandoned underground parking lots that are the clichéd environments of suspense and horror movies, known for their ridiculous type-casting of female victims.⁷ The sense of recognition on the part of the viewer, of having seen this scene before, is amplified by the camera angles, which peer at Duvall from behind corners or from over the shoulder of a sinister-looking figure. In each episode, Duvall is confronted by an attacker, but they are familiar characters to us by now: we recognize them as her instructors, but here they appear in costumes they have created, dressed perhaps as the assailants they imagine their students



The Toss, 2012. Video still, detail. Camera: Lee Henderson.

confronting, from hoodie-wearing thugs, to slick, cigarette-smoking gang leaders. Then comes the dramatic reversal in the anticipated story arc: a barrage of stuttering clips show Duvall grabbing her antagonists around the neck and flipping and tossing them to the ground, deflecting the attack and becoming the active defender who, having vanquished her enemy, walks calmly but confidently off into the horizon.

Though the content of these encounters could easily devolve into one-liner lessons about girl power —charting the now-familiar storyline of a victimized woman coming to autonomy through personal discovery —*The Toss* does not enter this territory, perhaps because of Duvall's healthy level of skepticism about the transformative limits of documentary video. As she did with *Where were the Mothers?*, Duvall uses montage, editing and replays to highlight and challenge viewers' expectations, reminding us of the tropes we have come to expect from these kinds of narratives and asking us to think about why they continue to adhere when they are so obviously constructed. What do these stories of personal vulnerability and agency offer us, as an audience? What happens to our viewing experience when these resolutions are suspended, frustrated or refuted, as they are through *The Toss's* self-reflexive structure, which constantly

reminds us that what we are watching is a carefully managed fiction? And why do we find such satisfaction in watching Duvall successfully perform the toss on her would-be aggressors?

In the context of Duvall's ongoing practice as a collaborative video artist, her role-reversal in *The Toss* critically reflects on her ethical responsibilities and commitments in inciting social interactions for the camera. Much like she asks her participants to do, Duvall establishes a scenario for herself where she is dependent on professionals she would not normally be in contact with, and must follow their advice and trust their expertise in front of the camera. Of course, taking on the role of the aggressor, a process that the pedagogical theorist Paulo Freire once famously described as "identifying with the oppressor," also has a psychic dimension that makes tales of revenge enduringly appealing for audiences.⁸ However, *The Toss* is not strictly a revenge scenario; Duvall is not playing out the same interaction that inspired this work, only with a reversal of power dynamics. Instead, she is imagining an alternate reality where the arbitrary nature of our encounters with violence can be teased out, then lovingly mastered through the tutelage of others, and creatively re-framed: a realm that video, through its ability to capture social



The Toss, 2012. Video still, detail. Camera: Jason Ebank.

interactions and to repeatedly play them back in real time, makes possible.

This is perhaps how the latency of care and learning creates the conditions for imagining experiences of trauma and conflict differently. As Britzman observes, care is also speculative and future-oriented, particularly when it manifests itself through expressions of love. As she puts it, “Expressions of love propose the grammatical tense of the subjunctive mood: what should have happened, what might happen, what happened for others, and what one wishes never to have happened.”⁹ By depicting an experience of care that is both rewarding and frustrating, that is tinged with both love and aggression, and that occurs in both the contingencies of everyday life and the imaginative future realms of fiction, *The Toss* opens up a space for the viewer to question their own practices of looking

and listening to the stories of others, asking us to acknowledge the complex dynamics at play in our identifications with one another.

Endnotes

1. Duvall was handcuffed and tossed by police outside of her home in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, in 2004. CTV cameras filmed the incident. See Robin Pacific, “Lament,” ARTSPACE, www.artspace-arc.org/exhibits/lament/linda_duvall.htm, 20 April 2005, accessed 20 February 2012.
2. Unpublished interview with artist, 24 November 2011.
3. I am grateful to Sally McKay for bringing Kersels’s project to my attention.
4. Deborah P. Britzman, “Love’s impressions: a psychoanalytic contribution,” *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 30. 6 (November 2009): 773–783, 774.
5. Britzman 775.
6. Britzman 777.
7. Unpublished interview with artist, 24 November 2011.
8. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1970/2000) 46.
9. Britzman 776.

Linda Duvall is a visual and media artist who works and presents within gallery contexts, on the web, and within defined public communities. She has degrees in Sociology and English (Carleton University) and Visual Arts (OCADU and University of Michigan) and is currently a Professional Affiliate at University of Saskatchewan. She has exhibited internationally, including solo exhibitions at Art Gallery of Hamilton, Dunlop Art Gallery, Art Gallery of Mississauga, Museo Nacional de Arte Moderno Guatemala City, Custom House Gallery Westport Ireland, Box Hotel Gallery Barcelona and Thunder Bay Art Gallery.

Gabrielle Moser is a writer, curator and PhD candidate in the art history and visual culture program at York University. Her writing appears on Artforum.com and in several other publications, including *Canadian Art*, *esse*, and *Fillip*. She has curated exhibitions and screenings for Vtape, Gallery TPW and The Leona Drive Project and is currently working on an exhibition about the relationship between contemporary art and labour for Vancouver’s Access Gallery.

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Gallery TPW gallerytpw.ca

56 Ossington Avenue, Toronto ON M6J 2Y7

T 416.645.1066 F 416.645.1681 E info@gallerytpw.ca

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