Beyond the Confessional: Three Case Studies Toward Sincerity in Art

What does it mean to make art about real feelings, and what does it mean to view it? What happens when integrity is divorced from sincerity? Markus Thor Andresson and Chen Tamir explore how artists reintroduce emotion and concepts like sincerity, integrity, humiliation and the pathetic in contemporary art.

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Questioning objective truth, late 20th century postmodern thought was predicated on critical distance. The desire to transcend this attitude appears in today's longing for emotional engagement and the susceptibility of the subjective language of emotions to interpretation. For example, terms such as 'irony' and 'sincerity' may, for some, exist as opposites while others would consider one to reside within the other. Much art of the last two decades investigates what is genuine, what is imitation, and what is pretense. What are the dimensions of sincerity? Does a straightforward statement amount to the banal? And does that amount to irony? Can ulterior motives exist behind sincere expression?

Before sincerity can be offered as a constructive mode, artists first address the different connotations embedded in the term: as a romantic ideal, as a tool for truthfulness or authenticity. Could it be that sincere expression simply demands nothing in return? Or is there always some form of manipulation involved, in which either the individual or an entire social structure expects something back? We might generalise that artists are sincere in their work, but what subjectivities do they have towards their subjects? What do they choose to display, or omit, and why? At the same time, we should consider the interpretations we make as viewers: when, how, and why we project the notion of sincerity onto a work of art. In the following pages, we will discuss three examples of artworks that examine clichés and manipulation, at times perhaps difficult to stomach. We come to these works with questions about a new kind of emotional sincerity emerging out of a commitment to authenticity -- a sincerity that is not quite as naive as it might first appear.

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Long has the pendulum swung between the Romantic and the Rational, valuing reason and emotion in turn. Historically, one begets the other; the passionate Renaissance was replaced by the austere Baroque, the flamboyant Rococo gave way to rational Neoclassicism, only to be rebuffed by Romanticism itself, and on it went. In the late 19th century, one could feel throughout the arts a general weltschmerz, the sadness of the world, and artists spilled their guts onto canvas. By contrast, for most of the last fifty years, contemporary art – and arguably much of contemporary culture – didn't easily accept such emotional openness. Around twenty years ago, the sincerity found in an abstract expressionist painting, for example, was looked at cynically. Today, sincerity is back, but in a form the humanist heroes of days past wouldn't have recognized. The new stream of sincerity has surfaced at a time when individual expression seems prized above all else. However, there appears to be a simultaneous diminishing of emotional scope. If emotions are at the core of our individual experience, there seems to be a contradiction in the alleged range of unique emotions and the 'flatness' with which they are manifested in cultural production. Notably, it is the very same culture industry that maintains the mantra of individualism on the one hand while creating an ersatz emotional landscape on the other. After the irony and cynicism of the 1980s and 1990s, we may have lost our ability to engage fully in the intricacies of emotions, leaving the distinct impression that in today's world, feelings can be encapsulated by a limited number of emoticons.

Over the past few decades, much of contemporary art has been dominated by conceptual or analytical, yet highly personal, work. Artists are identifying a shift in how our culture handles emotions. By delving into the rich intellectual insight that emotions provide, they are redefining sincerity, reminding viewers that rather than being simply a moral virtue, sincerity can be a useful social trope. It can be called upon when approaching another and obliging him or her to respond in turn in a serious, frank, and open way; meeting a seemingly sincere appeal in the mode in which it was made. But beyond that, sincerity itself can be tested, as exemplified by the works discussed below.

Looking at the ways artists are approaching the landscape of emotions it becomes apparent that contemporary art is ill-equipped with the means to explore it directly. In order to reintroduce emotion in art, artists sidestep the purely visual in favour of the narrative or linear, crossing paths with semiotics, theatre, film, or music. In the search for interpretive means when thinking about the complexities of emotions, contemporary viewers discover that Greenbergian terms such as ‘Sentimentality’ and ‘kitsch’ have become inadequate. Nostalgia and the sublime are examples of the few emotionally-charged notions in contemporary culture that have had a fair share of consideration in visual art, but the scope of our everyday emotional lives remains somewhat neglected; within that vacuum, a new kind of sincerity emerges. An important part of the problem ‘emotional’ artists run into is not so much a lack of means to express themselves but that expressive art has been brought into disrepute. In the steady process of the academization of art, art history, curatorial practice, and criticism, art itself has relied on a discourse around aesthetics that systematically separates art and life. We are, for example, more likely to read a catalogue essay about how recent scientific findings may illuminate a given artistic practice than an analysis based on emotional intelligence and insight. Such critical distance may have created grounds for the fatigue that arises among artists and viewers who claim that art practice lacks emotional content, since emotions themselves are difficult to have a discourse around.

The new sincerity attempts to bypass discourse and appeals directly to its audience. ‘Neo-sincerity’ is a term used in relation to cultural production that reacts to postmodern irony with sympathy and warmth. Cultural theorists Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker asserted that the 2000s gave way to a culture typified by a constant vacillation between attitudes evocative of the modern and the postmodern, but are ultimately suggestive of another sensibility altogether, one that rejects their dichotomies and negotiates ways between such predetermined oppositions as sincerity and irony.1 Coining a specific term for this attitude, ‘metamodernism’ oscillates between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony, the universal and the relative, hope and melancholy, construction and deconstruction, and the yearning for sense while simultaneously doubting that anything can make sense. Vermeulen and van den Akker seem to suggest that in the post 9/11 era, there was little room for irony and North American culture began to shift towards its alleged counterpart, sincerity, only to find that it needed to be redefined. Artists today vacillate between questioning or affirming the value of honest, unfiltered emotion, expressed and appreciated freely without pretence, against a background of wars and rebellions, while global warming threatens our planet’s destruction, and yet life (and the stock market) marches on.

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Amie Siegel My Way 1 2009 video, 9 minutes, colour/sound. Thomas Dane Gallery

Video of Amie Siegel My Way 1 2009 video, 9 minutes, colour/sound. Thomas Dane Gallery
Amie Siegel, My Way 1, 2009 [excerpt], video, 9 minutes, colour/sound. © Amie Siegel. Courtesy the artist and Thomas Dane Gallery

Amie Siegel My Way 2 2009 video, 12 minutes, colour/sound **[1]**

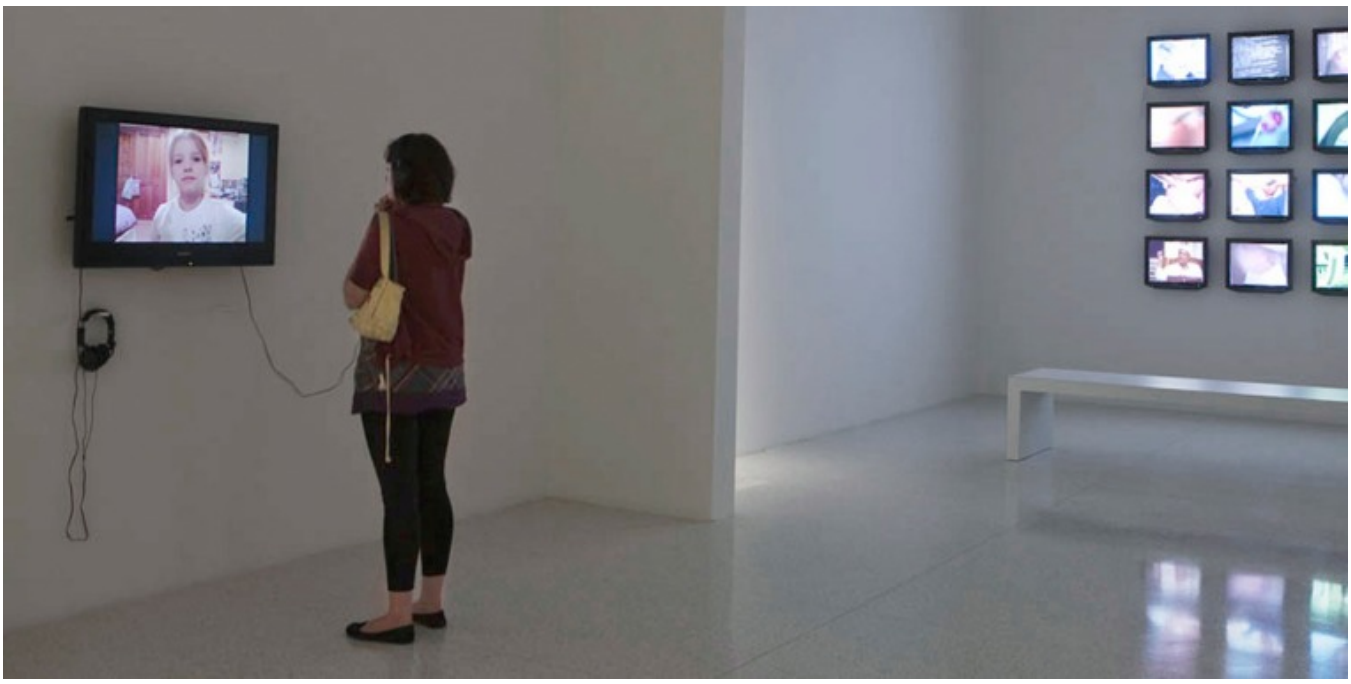
Video of Amie Siegel My Way 2 2009 video, 12 minutes, colour/sound
Amie Siegel, My Way 2, 2009 [excerpt], video, 12 minutes, colour/sound. © Amie Siegel. Courtesy the artist and Thomas Dane Gallery

In a world where personality is constantly performed and identity and self are in a continuous state of flux, it is hard to maintain emotional coherence. In the digital age, one's persona is 'manifested' incessantly; surfing the Internet, emailing, chatting, blogging, online gaming, or engaging in social media – providing new conditions for the construction of identity, some of which continue to be active after the user has turned away from their computer. Distributed networking leads to the perception that we are de-centered, multiple selves. In 1999, N. Katherin Hayles described this as the "posthuman condition."2 She writes about the contemporary ability to change perspectives fluidly and manifest oneself through different identities. Thanks to online profiles, as well as surveillance cameras, the fall of communism, and a capitalist system that increasingly markets exclusive, 'unique' experiences, we are in an age of self-obsession, narcissism, and entitlement. Today's generation, like the ones before it, is inspired by the vanguard of their time – and in our day there is nothing more wholly captivating than the Internet.

Amie Siegel's videos *My Way 1* and *My Way 2* (2009) compile dozens of clips taken from YouTube in which ordinary teenagers and adults sing famous songs. For *My Way 1*, Siegel gathered the online video performances of teenagers singing the pop hit "Gotta Go My Own Way" from YouTube. *My Way 2* follows a similar format to *My Way 1*, but uses clips of grown men singing Frank Sinatra's famous song, "My Way." Although they are singing from bedrooms and other private spaces, computers and cameras situate these amateur singers and fans in the most public forum imaginable: the Internet. Ironically, the uniformity of expression in these clips stands out in stark contrast to the songs about striking out on one's own, actualizing individuality, and going their "own way." Through the personal computer camera, these teenagers and grown men are living out private fantasies shared by thousands. Their online audience consists of both a projected viewer and an active global community of people producing culture, candidly sharing in what connects us to one another in our brave new world of anonymous public selves.

Unabashed in their vulnerability, without a shred of sarcasm, they belt out tunes for the wide world to hear – all from the comfort of their homes. Known as 'tribute videos' this phenomenon has found a place online, where embarrassment seems to be a foreign concept.

03_Siegel_MyWay1_2009_ExhibitionView_WEB.jpg **[2]**



[3]
Amie Siegel, *My Way 1*, 2009, video, 9 minutes, colour/sound
© Amie Siegel. Courtesy the artist and Thomas Dane Gallery

03_Siegel_MyWay2_2009_ExhibitionView_WEB.jpg **[4]**



[5]
Amie Siegel, *My Way 2*, 2009, video, 12 minutes, colour/sound
© Amie Siegel. Courtesy the artist and Thomas Dane Gallery

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Ragnar Kjartansson and Magnus Sigurdarson similarly put on display their most private and pitiable selves in *Intimacy* (2004), a photo series of the two men in the nude, embraced in painfully intimate poses reminiscent of historic painting and sculpture. The photos were created in a traditional portraiture style; black and white studio shots set against a background of batik curtains. Both naked, the artists hold and support one another in dramatic, melancholic poses. The postures are reminiscent of classical sculpture in which emotions were interpreted through physical interaction and theatrical drama, such as in the genres of *The Wounded Soldier* or *Pieta*, both of which are referenced in this work. The unbearable intimacy between these two men is enough to make any viewer blush with embarrassment, particularly because, despite their nakedness, the men express an emotional, even spiritual connection, rather than a physical one. Bypassing the homoerotic and focusing instead on pure intimacy, goads the viewer to question his or her embarrassment and ask why we bristle at intimacy.

The photo series is part of a larger project involving a video performance and a musical element. Several troubadours were singing inside the photo installation, each strumming a melancholic tune on their guitar and singing about love and loss. The individual performances formed a melancholic harmony, if somewhat cacophonous. The video showed Kjartansson and Sigurdarson hanging from a cross, in the roles of the two thieves next to the crucifixion of Christ on hill of Golgotha. The two artists have an open and honest conversation about their innermost matters, staged in a situation where imminent death rules out any kind of reservation or insincerity.

In a statement on his web page, Sigurdarson highlights a belief he has held to throughout his career: “Never Ever Underestimate the Power of the Pathetic!”[3] These artists seem to flaunt their feebleness while retaining a sense of overall integrity, even coolness. It is as if their self-esteem is so intact that it can withstand, and possibly be made stronger by their embrace of the pathetic. It is

their strong connection to their emotions and simultaneous sense of self that makes these men intriguing and utterly ‘neo’ sincere. This type of work owes much to Just Pathetic, an exhibition curated by Ralph Rugoff in 1990 that kicked off interest in the pathetic. According to Rugoff:

Whenever failure to successfully conform can be attributed to a lack of mastery and self-control, to a laughable powerlessness, that behavior is in danger of being labelled pathetic. To be pathetic, in other words, is to be a loser, haplessly falling short of the idealized norm. Art which embraces the pathetic voluntarily wallows in this embarrassing territory. While all art risks failing, pathetic art makes failure its medium.4

Kjartansson and Sigurdarson embrace the notion of the pathetic and are unembarrassed, possibly even a little proud, to present their feebleness to the world. Their attitude suggests they have found a strategy to counteract the pressure to conform to masculine roles that constitutes such a big part of the emotional manipulation of men in contemporary society.

unnamed.jpg **[6]**



[7]
View of Ragnar Kjartansson & Magnús Sigurðarson: Intimacy, 2004
From the exhibition Ragnar Kjartansson: God, I Feel So Bad, Reykjavik Art Museum, 2017
Courtesy of the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York & i8 Gallery, Reykjavik

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To see what happens when integrity is divorced from sincerity, we can turn to the work of Meiro Koizumi. Koizumi focuses on repression, social norms, and the individual's reaction to boundaries. He works in drawing, collage, and video, looking at Western and Japanese cultures and the isolation of the individual in both. For *Human Opera XXX* Koizumi put out a newspaper call seeking people who would discuss their true personal tragedies for a fee. The video opens with Koizumi, his face painted silver, setting up a dark studio cluttered with strange objects, and shiny, crinkled dark paper hanging in the background. As the man tells his story of alcoholism, divorce, and the loss of his daughter, Koizumi continually interrupts him, claiming that he is trying to improve the formal composition of the frame. He asserts that his interventions of including preposterous props, scribbling on the man's face and torso, and having him perform silly actions such as wagging a feathered stick add "drama" or "beauty" to the story. Despite the ridiculous props and degrading instructions Koizumi demands, the man persists with his story, even mumbling it after Koizumi has stuffed a roll of bread into his mouth. The video ends with the man posed quietly and completely still, drool dripping from the bread in his mouth, while Koizumi stands behind the back wall, his silver face popping out through a hole, moaning loudly through a long tube.

We are not told how much the man in *Human Opera XXX* was compensated for his troubles, but surely he did not endure such humiliation for money alone. His perseverance is a testament to the human drive to obey instructions, and also to purge oneself of one's secrets and stories, as if in confession. Viewers are left bristling from the abuse of power by the artist, his subject's vulnerability, and the audience's place as witness. *Human Opera XXX* is in effect a "stress test" that probes what it means to make art about a real person, and what it means to view it.

Koizumi's reprehensible behaviour is carried out in the name of art – begging the ultimate question: Where does this leave the viewer? This deplorable act has been done so that someone can see it; so that we, the viewers, can see it, as if slowing down to glimpse a car wreck. The same is true for Siegel's work, with unabashed frankness that's almost laughable. And for Kjartansson and Sigurdarson's cheesy bromance. Are all these people for real? Are they really okay with us seeing them this way? In art, as in life, the subject can't exist unless we viewers do. Thus, we are implicated in the power relations and social dynamics at play in these works. We are, by extension, partly responsible for the choices made in works that push the limits of spectatorship; they probe what viewers want and expect from the experience of consuming artwork. What does it mean to make art about real feelings, and what does it mean to view it? Ultimately, works that goad us to ask such questions prompt us to examine ourselves, our emotional inheritance, and even our ethical boundaries.

***** This text is based on the catalogue to the exhibition "Emotional Blackmail" curated by Chen Tamir and Markus Thor Andresson and commissioned by the Southern Alberta Art Gallery in Canada in 2011.**

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- 1. Vermeulen, Timotheus and Robin van den Akker. "Notes on Metamodernism," *Journal of Aesthetics and Culture*" 2010.
- 2. N. Katherin Hayles, How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature and Informatics. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).
- 3. From the artist's website, http://magnussigurdarson.com/bio.php [8], accessed on August 9, 2011. The phrase furthermore echoed in Kjartansson's lyrics performed with his folk band, The Funerals, on the album *Pathetic Me*, released by Thule Music in 2001
- 4. As quoted by Robert Storr in "Just Exquisite?:The Art of Richard Tuttle", *Artforum*, Nov. 1997, pp. 86-93, 130

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