

Search for Definition... Part III

Yvonne Singer and W. Mark Sutherland

Number 17, Fall 1991

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/945ac>

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Publisher(s)

Le Centre de diffusion 3D

ISSN

0821-9222 (print)

1923-2551 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Singer, Y. & Sutherland, W. M. (1991). Search for Definition... Part III. *Espace Sculpture*, (17), 32–34.

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Yvonne Singer, *Search for Definition II*. Brock Centre for the Arts, St. Catharines, Ontario, February 1991

This text has been written as two voices speaking parallel to each other, in order to create... Search for Definition Part III.

WMS: A definition is a formal statement of meaning, a fixed point or axis of reference which is circumscribed by rules and boundaries. Is the title and composition of your latest work intended to be ironic?

YS: Yes, I think irony enters the work in a generalized attitude. It's not that I set out to say that I'm now creating ironic situations and this will be ironic, it's just not that specific. I think that an ironic view of the world is just so much a part of the way I see. I, also, believe the irony is found in the title and the word "Definition" rather than "Search". Actually, a further irony in this title are the words "Part II" and the fact that people ask is there a Part I. Yes, there is a Part I, but Part I has never been seen publicly by anybody.

Naming is preparation for description and definition. We construct our perceptions of reality via the composite and component parts of language. Is this the motivation for the present project?

Searching for Definition is both an ironic and serious attempt at a kind of categorizing and naming. So in that sense the work is about trying to identify certain elements that exist at the same time as creating a search for a definition in a very literal way. As the title suggests, the actual making of the exhibition, the putting together of components is a way to trying to define what those components are. What the definition is, what I'm searching for, is hard to discuss because it is such a shifting context. Maybe part of the irony, unintentionally, is the fact that the title was chosen before the work was made.

The disparate elements that make up the aggregate entitled *Searching for Definition Part II* are photos, clothing, and dates. Taken separately each component elicits specific referential meanings in and of themselves as objects and signs. Briefly describe how and why each component was chosen.

I'm even trying to figure out how this whole definition came about. I'm having a little trouble trying to re create the whole process, but the clothing was a component that was there from the beginning. The part of the clothing that wasn't there from the beginning was the idea of the random pile on the floor. The way the clothing happened or where the clothing came from is from this bag of old clothing that sits in one of my cupboards, it's an accumulation of things that are about to be thrown out or not good enough to quite throw out. They exist in a kind of limbo. They've served their usefulness in one domain, they've been worn, they've been rejected and so they go in this pile. The bag sits in my cupboard for weeks sometimes years and waits for somewhere to go, not ready to be discarded without any specific direction. I can't just throw it out while it still seems to have some kind of usefulness and I want to do something with it, I want to place it in a proper home, I want to make sure it still carries it's history because it still carries something which I want to define and I cannot discard it.

The photos were the most straight forward component of the installation. The idea for the photographs came from photos that I took of my children where inadvertently their eyes were closed. They came out of the regular snapshot. "I want to take your picture right now!" Here, you are at your aunt's in the country lets take a picture of the three sisters together and their eyes are all closed - you can't get them to be all smiling at the same time like vogue models. So they came out of that kind of snapshot situation. There is something intriguing about this snapshot format when the eyes were/are closed and this act creates a subversion of the whole strategy of taking snapshots. I really like what happened, I like the fact that there was this other kind of closure created by the eyes. The installation photos are Polaroids of people that I work with in the university situation. They are colleagues - not all in visual arts, some are in theater, some are in film, some are actually students. They are people I have interacted with for the last couple of years and they are people I know in certain ways and obviously don't know in other ways. When I thought of putting this exhibition together what I wanted to do was take snapshots of my colleagues but reflect the fact that they are circumscribed within their work environment because that's how I know them. Some of them I have personal

It is generally understood that a definition is a formal statement of meaning, a fixed point, an axis of reference circumscribed by boundaries and parameters. To define we describe and our descriptions take place within the language game. To successfully describe we label and although these labels are a means of representation this act of naming/labeling is preparation for description. The difficulty we encounter occurs on two fronts, language labels are restrictive and our language is imprecise. Due to this imprecision we are forced to rely on resemblances, composites, components, memory and indirect associations. The result is that ones definition of a given reality is likewise imprecise and furthermore the unholy alliance of rationality and intuition compound our disorder with more questions and answers. Within the language game there is no longer hegemony, hierarchical structures are collapsing, and the closed frontiers of any given definition becomes a playground of shifting rules, disintegrating and blurring boundaries informed and mis-informed by the given context. Wittgenstein addresses this problem in *Philosophical Investigations* with the following passage: «is the visual image of this tree composite, and what are its component parts? the correct answer is: that depends on what you understand by composite.» He then states «compare the composition of forces, the division of a line by a point outside it; these expressions show that we are sometimes even inclined to conceive the smaller as a result of a composition of greater parts, and the greater as the result of a division of the smaller.» We are continually aware of the questions that need to be asked but are unsure of the answers. Thus, language, memory and consciousness become a puzzle in the shifting contextual waves of time and space.

Yvonne Singer's *Searching for Definition Part II* is a working model of this dialectic. In this installation the work moves from merely simulacrum of perception to encompass the act of perception itself and we encounter a conundrum in our attempts to name or re-name the phenomena.

The aggregate called *Searching for Definition Part II* is composed of three individual parts - clothing, photos, dates. Each component contributes to the aggregate in that paradoxically each item retains meaning and former meanings in and of themselves - on the one hand harboring clues to a possible narrative while at the same time repudiating and confounding any linear process. The gaps and blurrings of boundaries within definition and therefore meaning initiate a search in the observer/viewer and the artist herself. This lacuna de-centers the installation and becomes instrumental in the investigation of possibilities, probabilities and unresolved conflicts.

relationships with but the parameters of the relationship have to do with the fact that I work with them. They are not only part of my life in the work scene but they may be an ongoing part of my life professionally. The work environment suggests something about them but also suggests absences as well in the same way their eyes being closed suggests a kind of intimacy but also a distancing. It's a personal/impersonal kind of interaction that is taking place and in fact when I actually did the Polaroids of them a very interesting thing happened. To ask someone if you can take their picture has its own kind of dynamic. It's another thing to ask them to take their picture but to close their eyes. In each case there was a reaction that I got that was unanticipated with this dynamic.

The filo wax magnifier was a way of looking, forcing people to look closer. They are magnifying sheets that are used in order to compensate for poor eye sight and to be placed in your fax organizer as one of the other things that you can use to structure your life, help you to zero in, focus closely and be more precise. These sheets even have a ruler at the bottom that you can use to actually rule or to measure things. The magnifier creates a parameter around the photograph and gives you a sense that it is an ordering device. The fact that it says Le Fax at the top is important to me because it is a label and the label has a significance, it's a modern symbol in the same way that a Ralph Lauren polo shirt is a symbol.

On the dates, I asked the people in the photos to give me half a dozen or more significant dates that are important in their lives for some reason. I say «I don't want to know why they are important. You will know why they are significant, people who know you may know their significance but nobody else will know». The only other restriction I gave them was that the dates had to be placed on a 5" x 7" piece of paper because the frame that I was going to use was that size. Otherwise, there were no restrictions; they could type them, write them, they could situate them in the past or the future.

In terms of formal structure your approach to Searching for Definition is like quilting where scraps and detritus are reconstituted as a whole. Is quilting an apt analogy to describe this aesthetic practice and is the practice a uniquely feminine perspective?

No, quilting is not part of my experience at all, but the idea of the fragmentation is very much a part of my experience and I think the fragmentation has to do with the feminine experience as well as with my rootlessness, my immigrant experience. Fragmentation comes out of my personal history and perspective in the world, my sense of rootlessness of not being identified with any particular cultural or religious group and in terms of feminist issues having to do with growing up in a family where there were certain things I was excluded from simply because I was female: so that sense of the ground constantly shifting under your feet and trying to find your place, whether its in terms of gender identification, cultural identification or in terms of any kind of placement of one's self in some kind of context comes out of my personal history.

Comment on this statement - from a technical and philosophical stand point the juxtaposition of disparate elements eliminates or reduces fixed boundaries so that formal statements of meaning blur and distort. The assumption of meaning therefore depends upon the gaps between the object/observer and what the viewer/observer remembers.

That's right, its about absence. In fact until you made that statement, I didn't realize how much absence and lack there is in this particular installation. The things that are not there, the things that are not spoken, the things that you have to infer are part of this constant dislocation of interpretation and the boundaries of the installation are specifically set up to do that, so at every level you are sabotaged. You look closely to try and get more definition through the magnifying glass, you look at the people, their eyes are closed, you're stopped there. It's set up in a very formal way and there does seem to be a logic to the progression of the images, to the way the clothing is specifically attached to the set of photographs. But in fact the placement of the photographs was done randomly. We started with the center wall and the people that I worked with installing this show said to me «OK this is the middle of the wall, this is where we should start» and I said «I don't want to choose the order here, I want the order to be as random as possible» so we deliberately turned the photographs over and shuffled them like cards. We never knew who was coming up next so the placement of the photos had to do with the way we started from the center of the room and then went out in either direction, only concerned with how the placement looked aesthetically or

Taken individually even the component parts which appear as fixed points of reference conspire to sabotage a complete reading. The use of clothing is open to many interpretative possibilities - clothing defines humans, it covers the skin and acts as both disguise and a form of personal expression. Clothing is likewise intricately connected to the concept of time through our understanding of fashion (in and out of fashion) - a tangible and tactile embodiment of history. Clothing can be considered the container of social, political, economic and historical residue, an objectification and commodification of culture and lifestyle. It could be said that clothing frequently



defines and disguises the cultural skeleton above and beyond its purely utilitarian purpose. Clothing as a container of social, political and economic history is analogous to the art gallery proper. The random pile of clothing in the middle of the floor emphasizes, subverts and confounds the gallery tradition by bringing into question the meaning of the gallery proper - is it an historical repository of cultural refuse and discarded objects? Once again the narrative weave encounters a grand enigma. Clothing, itself, is constructed by a weaving of threads, each thread intertwined with other threads - an aggregate of atoms carefully disguising themselves and the space within the created object. The individual threads and the disguised space are only revealed through constant wear and use as well as through the natural progression of time and the disintegration of the object in time. The Polaroid photographs are similarly an objectification of time and memory, a reflection or representation of a given reality but never that reality. Each Polaroid is a frozen moment in time which immediately becomes the past. The use of three Polaroids of each sitter taken seconds apart with their eyes closed is a sequential/serialization of time. The closure of the sitters' eyes implies a vulnerability, a fragility and also a

Yvonne Singer, *Search for Definition II*, 1991. Installation, detail. Brock Centre for the Arts, St. Catharines, Ontario. Photo: Y. Singer.

measuring considerations - how does this look, should it be higher or should it be lower. The juxtaposition of the content of the photographs was to be left to chance. With the clothing we did the same thing. I had a plastic bag of clothing, I would pull out an item and we would attach it to each photographic unit that we were working with at that particular time. This was a deliberate and constant attempt to skew the whole system. The pile of clothing at the end was a natural thing to do. Whatever clothing was left over in the bag was dumped there on the gallery floor. There again, if you were trying to make specific connections you were being frustrated in making those specific connections, hopefully at every turn.

When an object is broken into pieces can it still retain its name and meaning, conversely when a broken piece or division of parts are re assembled, how should we go about re-naming and re-assigning meaning to the new aggregate?

I don't know, that's why I keep doing it. I don't know what the reconstituted fragments are. Are they parts of the old? Are they in fact new? What are they - that is the search for definition. Is there a definition to be found on the end or is it a situation that is de-centered? Is there a way of finding the center? Is there a center to be found or in my case is it the way that it works

prevailing sense of death, distance and separation, simultaneously. Are the contents of these photographs mute traces of human existence or still life? At the forefront of the photos is a filo fax transparent magnifier that distorts the Polaroids thus becoming for the viewer/observer a visual distortion of a distortion - an analogue and representation of the act of photography itself. At the bottom of the magnifier is a ruler, the ruler being a mathematical division of space and the organization of space into quantitative measurement. At the top, Le Fax, a brand label, is imprinted on the magnifier. Magnifier label becomes signifier (Le Fax), a brand name implying speed and organization in the means of communication. Why an enlargement of a representation of real life/still life? Why the inherent contradiction of closeness and distance? Could it be the juxtaposition of confused signals, the detachment and irony of the sitters' closed eyes, the quantitative measurement of space, and the implied speed of communications over time is the source of our present anxiety and alienation. To the right of the photographs are specific dates selected by the sitters. The artist and the viewer/observer are unaware of the significance of these dates and yet the inclusion of such data in the composite search becomes another essential clue to the workings of the human mind and its desire to rationalize, quantify, label and categorize all within the boundaries of time and space. Each date is a fixed segment of time and time like language is indestructible - something such as these objects in time can be destroyed but time itself cannot be destroyed. Here, not unlike the photos, our ephemeral passage of time is written down, recorded and made visible so as to further anchor the installation to its placement in space.

Searching for Definition Part II is not unlike a quilt where the scraps and detritus - that which is rejected and unworthy, are reconstituted as a new aggregate while conversely retaining their separateness within the whole. The juxtaposition of unlikely fragments, remnants, relics, and icons of human life in this manner eliminates fixed boundaries so that formal statements of meaning blur and the restrictions of objecthood and fact can no longer explain or contain the limits of our perception. Form, structure and content become perceptual gaps continually opening up beyond the possibilities of a single personal narrative and the closed definitions of the objects themselves. The gaps or absences allow the viewer/reader/observer entrance and participation into the search and the viewer themselves become fulcrum, link or conduit towards meaning. Each participant drags their own cultural baggage after them as they search through the web of similarities, uncertainties and the order of possibilities while attempting to fill the lacunae. Groping towards the horizon the viewer/participant is forced to ask the question: "how should I name or label the new aggregate which encompasses time and space and yet appears to transcend my present understanding of time and space". Is this labeling of the new aggregate the primordial act of perception, the schematic incubation of thought or simply another phenomenological rendering of human experience. In every case the search for definition is inscribed by the language game. The discovery of clues, the creation of new labels or the answer to any question is merely preparation for the formulation of the next question - an endless example of humanity's perpetual search for definition, meaning and immutable truths in a chaotic universe. WMS. ♦



for me, that there will never be a center. It's just shifting ground and each body of work is about that search for the center that may in fact not exist. The center is the way I might define the restructured fragments. Will the fragments ever be re-constituted into some kind of whole image or is there in fact such a thing as that whole integrated image? Is the center in fact an illusion? I think that's part of the underlining anxiety in the work and what the search for definition is. ♦

Yvonne Singer, *Search for Definition II*, 1991.
Installation, detail. Brock Centre for the Arts, St.
Catherines, Ontario. Photo: Y. Singer.