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Considered

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Constructing Worlds F4: An Artist Collective Considered

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Abstract: This paper investigates an artist collective that is comprised of a nuclear family, the parents and their two children. The key theme revolves around implications of power relations within this collective construct. The artist collective F4 operates between the realm of the subconscious and the analytical, in conjunction with the blend of 'the imaginary' and 'the lived experience' characteristic of the daily lives of children. This paper will within this context, explore the intrinsic relationship between process and concept; art and life within the artwork produced by the collective.

Keywords: Collective, Family, Testimony, The Subconscious, Intersubjectivity, Fragmentary, Patterns of the Personal, Transitional Phenomena, Lived Experience and Power

Introduction

THIS PAPER IS a case study of an artist collective known as F4; the collective is also a nuclear family; comprising a mother and father, a son and a daughter. It is my intention to consider the implicit and explicit ways that F4 explores power and authority within the structure of the collective and through their art making; in order to do this I will discuss both their process and specific artworks under the headings; The testimonial, The collective as response, The family as fragment, The ownership of power, Reading power, Patterns of the personal, Blank space and The Gaze. Throughout I will be reflecting on the myriad ways 'real life' both infuses and infects the artwork produced by this collective.

In what manner does the artwork reflect its collective roots and how does the collective inform the nature of familial relations, can the 'children' ever be children without also being subjects, can the 'parents' be other than orchestrators? This could be read as a conventional description of 'the familial dilemma', that is to say as parents it is expected that you will continually define your child's reality, that from the outset children are subject to parental notions of right and wrong and the child's relationship with the world is mediated by the experiences provided by their parents. Despite the collective nature of F4 acting as a mirror of family life, the uncertainty that surrounds the subjugation of the children remains the origin of many of the questions raised around this collective and as such underscores the need to take the threads of their family life between the fingers and rub them until they separate a small amount.

In Roland Barthes book *Camera Lucid*, he reflects on his inability to recall the exact moment in time a certain photograph was taken of him, 'I went to the photographer's show as a police investigation, to learn at last what I no longer knew about myself.'¹ The idea that one could investigate images of oneself in order to learn about who you are now, seems an

¹ Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida, Reflections on Photography*. Translated by Richard Howard. France: Farrar, Strauss, Giroux, 1981, 85

appropriate starting point for an analysis of F4's relationship to photography and how it has provided them with the ability to explicate a notional understanding of family within the context of art collective. This collective photograph only themselves, over and over in reference to the power of the photograph as testimonial.

The Testimonial

On this day, in real life, the great hotel building competition commenced. The Hotel was a virtual construct, created in a digital environment but it was nevertheless to be judged on real criteria; how comfortable it appeared, what the building looked like, where it was situated in the landscape, and the activities one could indulge oneself in. One parent was to be the judge, and as is often the way, had predetermined the winner, fairness not always being criteria. The winner was the child with the lyrical sensibility, the one who had determined that a house high up in a tree was a good place to live, the one who remembered that restaurants could, in truth, be inside caves because in real life they had eaten in a cave restaurant only a few short months ago. The small dramas of everyday life were compounded when the much-vaunted competition faulted as fire consumed the hotel of the uncrowned winner.

This anecdote is one from the life of this family; it is a documented account of how to be a parent is to weigh every micron of daily life, make choices, and grapple with immaterial decisions and ultimately to struggle to rationalize the unpredictable. The narrative illustrates how play can result in a myriad of constructed interactions, the parent is preoccupied with justifying choices; it is not simply a game. The anecdote also records how play can embody consequences; the illusion transforming into the real results in unfeigned emotions and tears.

Again I refer to Barthes *Camera Lucida* but this time it is the moment of recognition. 'This *something* has triggered me, has provoked a tiny shock, a *satori*, the passage of a void [it is of no importance that its referent is insignificant].'² The moment when *something* is identified as important, though at first it may appear as nothing extraordinary is a recurrent theme in the work of this collective and the reason behind their unremitting scrutiny of self. The subjection of their daily performances to the inquisition of the camera originated from the parents, as with all parents they desired to capture time and reflect on it, the children were too young to be conscious of the passage toward death. Because the parents are both artists their photographs were also public artefacts, their children and their lives open to inspection, thus it seemed to them necessary to include the children's voice in the project.

Here too, Barthes supplies the quote when he states that 'The reading of public photographs is always, at bottom, a private reading.'³

The Collective as Response

The Chambers Concise Dictionary has the words; *Collective* as meaning forming one mass, assemblage or gathering and *Family* as meaning a group of people related to one another or otherwise connected.

The question frequently asked by audiences of these parents is "how do the children contribute?" as if the word *collective* imposes a rational division of labour, when in truth,

² IBID: 49

³ Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida, Reflections on Photography*. Translated by Richard Howard. France: Farrar, Strauss, Giroux, 1981, 97

the dictionary definition offers another view, 'a group of people who run a business for their mutual benefit, often with no specifically designated jobs.'⁴ If jobs were the cornerstone of the creation of a collective then the children in this collective would appear to be at a significant advantage over the parents, as it is not feasible for them to undertake much in the division of labour.

It is not because these children aren't able to carry out most of the tasks required in the production of art, both children have acquired practical competencies and can take photographs and understand light meter readings. They comprehend the principles of animation and can record video, draw, sew and dress up. It is more that they are not required to undertake these activities most of the time, as in life they do not pay the bills or drive the car they are, after all children, when this collective was first formed the daughter was only five years old.

Perhaps it is this fact that confounds people, how could they be willing players? Surely they have been co-opted as opposed to consciously choosing to participate? There is unchallenged truth in this; however, it is also reasonable to assert that all children are co-opted into the social world by their parents and so as a line of enquiry it does not seem particularly pertinent to this conversation. What is more interesting is that F4's commitment to the idea of a collective has produced understanding and engagement in the children that is conscious, increasingly so. The collective nature of the artistic practice they engage in is different for each individual, the mutual benefit is not questioned, everyone contributes and everyone gains in a range of different ways. Sometimes the gain is small; a conversation, an idea shared, time spent together; sometimes it is big like a six month fellowship.

The Family as Fragment

If each member in a family is viewed as a fragment of the whole and each fragment draws its referents from that whole, then it seems reasonable to claim that individuals are constituted from an amalgam of personal histories. An individual's actions reference understanding, primarily from their parents and later it widens out to become references drawn from ones community, however, the connection to ones genetic family is interiorized, so that even if one does not know their parents, they remain connected to that parental influence through DNA.

Perhaps then it is apt to say that, as they constitute a family each member of F4 are analogous to the idea of 'cut-outs' and that each piece 'receives its very meaning from that ensemble that it thus posits and presupposes rather than challenges.'⁵ In other words each person exists in reference to the whole, a quintessentially architectural idea. Pamela M. Lee's discussion of the influence of *the whole* when referring to the series of work by the artist Gordon Matta Clark, known as the 'cut-outs', is of interest to us. Matta Clark cut sections from disused buildings and exhibited them as separated entities, nevertheless each disconnected portion retained information that linked it back to its whole. Concepts of connection and dislocation manifest in Matta Clarks work seem strangely to fit the notion of family evident in the work of this collective. Namely, that each person even if absent from the image, leaves 'a trace that registers it's temporal remove from the set of conditions that gave rise

⁴ Edited by Davidson, G. W., Seaton, M. A., Simpson J. and Chambers, W. and R. *Chambers Concise Dictionary* University Press: Cambridge, 1988.

⁵ Gasches, Rodolphe. *Philosophical Fragments Ideality in Fragmentation*. Introduction to Friedrich Schlegel. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991, 7

to it'.⁶ Thus the collective becomes an indexical mark, a signifier of family, the trace of membership evident forever in their artwork.

The Ownership of Power

Within F4's collective structure the ownership of power and its assertion are fluid, because the nature of the interaction of the individuals is determined by the production of artwork. The photograph communicates power relationships in its formal aspects as much as through its content, with numerous references to the every day struggles of communicating and the desire to assert dominance. In the work F4 employ portraiture and tableau vivant both of which emphasize the constructed nature of the image, a mimesis.

Portraiture speaks to the nature of looking, of consuming another through the gaze; power therefore sits both within the viewer [as witness] and concurrently with the actors. The family in the images, ironically remain themselves, you can see they are confronting each other's authority, you can see their attendant failure but they are not concealing it as a lie, rather they are acknowledging it to you. They declare themselves through the contingent nature of photography, the actors ability to look but not engage because everything else is an after thought, a stream of events that does not require their attention, they exist simply for that flash of disclosure and have claimed that instant to display themselves openly.

It is like the moment the child breaks down in the supermarket and screams at the parent for the thing they want most but are denied, invariably the child has some understanding of their surroundings and even possibly the vulnerability of the parents public persona, depending on the child's age. As such the child is able to manipulate the situation to their end, but often it is much less conscious an act than that, it is simply a private act of declaration, which occurs in a public space.

Power is both illustrated in and asserted through the photographic, the children's claim to authority is evidenced in the work via the intensity of their gaze and the obvious expression of exasperation that infects their eyes, they ask who are these people? And why am I required to put up with their aberrant behaviours? They are caught in the paradox of childhood, that of being subject to the actions and authority of parents who are often injudicious.

In F4's photographic image *The Correction* the parent is a desultory individual, who claims authority through his clothing but who manifestly betrays his socially endowed influence by wearing instead of a hat on his head, the unstuffed remains of a child's toy rabbit. The girl child, who is dressed as such in a soft pink leotard, refuses to grant him the substance he claims through age and dress, instead she engages the viewers gaze, in a confronting manner implicating them in her disaffection.

It is also interesting to note with regard to ideas of dislocation that this work exists in two parts, the protagonists do not inhabit the same frame and as such could be entirely disconnected with one another except that clearly authority is asserted by one and the other counters that assertion. In this estranged landscape the references to authority are fluid and lead us to a discussion about reading *power* as a substantiation of socialisation and how accepted wisdom around parental authority is frequently fashioned from an imperfect image.

⁶ Lee, Pamela. M. *Object to be Destroyed. The work of Gordon Matta Clark*. London: The MIT Press, 2000, 86



F4: *The Correction*. Collection of the James Wallace Trust, 2009

Reading Power

Reading the power relations in this work, I am reminded of D. W. Winnicott's writings on the *intermediate state*, a state of being that resides 'between a baby's inability and his growing ability to recognise and accept reality.'⁷ Winnicott asserts this state also exists in art and is 'the substance of *illusion*'⁸. *Becoming*, then is the terrain that is located perilously between the subjective and the objective, a landscape where power is as much illusory, as it is erroneous. Within the illusion of art, power can be volatile, because it does not require the same concretization, as reality tends to demand.

The parents in this collective undoubtedly have power; they are after all, the adults and as such have power granted to them by the state. This power does not rely on them being particularly good parents or particularly good people. In this collective the parents have abrogated a degree of responsibility to the children because they recognise the flawed nature of its claim. However, this abrogation does not come without contest and is often resigned with ill humour as any giving up tends to draw out social anxiety around indebtedness and reciprocity, acknowledging a pervading sense that children owe their parents something even if it can not be named.

These parents want to offer their children a voice, even when it creates in them a sense of loss, a loss they struggle to accept despite understanding that giving invites the possibility of receiving. The act of giving up also underscores the fact that the role of parenting is inevitably open to question, the prime questioner being the child.

However, these children occupy a landscape where it is not possible, for two key reasons to assert adult forms of power; firstly they are unable to replicate the warrant bestowed by parental status and secondly because *fine art* is an adult construct. Their power then, must be won through all the usual means; no one avoids the subjective nature of being human.

⁷ Winnicott, Donald.W. *Playing and Reality*. London: Routledge, 2009, 3

⁸ IBID: 4

Tantrums and creativity; the assertion of individual need, these domains are open to the children.

Yet within the art collective, their parents have reorganized their reality; even tantrums are fodder for artistic expression. The dreams, petty resentments and obsessions of everyday family life are considered, associations are made that only maturity understands or can construct into art works.



F4: *The Daughter*. Collection of the Artists, 2010

Her loathing in this instance to perform in this photographic shoot is palpable yet the fury that underscores her stance and look is the reason the image has presence; in this piece of *mise en scène* she has unwittingly infused the image with her anger.

Patterns of the Personal

The parent's impetus for such intense scrutiny is driven by a fascination with both the otherness and the similarity between the children and themselves. However, the children's driving self-belief and inability to conceive of end points, turns the tables on the adult's scrutinizing gaze, the parents become the *not-me* objects [the first objects recognised as other than self] of the children's search for satisfaction, the children force their parents to experience each second, every act performed by delicate negotiations. Here then the children hold the upper hand; these parents are pawns in a game designed by their offspring.



F4: *The Preparation*. Collection of the Artists, 2010

A key work in the discussion of power is the work entitled *The Preparation*. It is a chronicle of *power as relationship* and as an image of the family and collective experience, it is perhaps the most potent made by F4 to date.

Here we see intentionality and agency in action as in Edmund Husserl's *noema* whereby the mother is the object which represents meaning. Surrounding her and engaged with her only as an objectified extension of themselves, the protagonists are locked in a battle of wills. The possession of the object is what both children seek, they wish to both claim and challenge her as a transitional phenomena, she is joined to them and yet separate, existing as an inter-subjective entity to be perceived and yet not seen. In addition to this tension the children wear the same outfit, an American Scouting shirt with its authoritarian overtones and emergent enactment of power through an impersonation of militarism.

The son claims his rights over the mother as object, she is subject to him, to his assertive gaze. Whilst the girl is locked in an embrace with the mother, tethered by the remnants of play she has sellotaped herself to the mother and in doing so claims the mother as her own, she is a reflection of the mother and as such looks away beligerantly refusing to engage in the debate she knows she has already won. What can be seen in this work is a representation of the intertwining acts of manipulation and authority asserted by the children, the power enacted is not just one of mother/child but also of gender.

Winnicott discusses in his writing on *Transitional Phenomena*, the development of *patterns of the personal* beginning in infancy these patterns mature over time into mannerisms. Personal patterns are characterized by small gestures that soothe, acting as a release when faced with stress, such as humming. In the work of F4 it is possible to detect allusions to such *patterns*, though the protagonists are immobilized within the space of the photograph.

In the photographs the parents occupy two key roles, either they are *subject to* the child as a not-me object [a transitional object] or alternatively they become *the* child. When the parents take on the role of *the* child in the images they adopt mannerisms, however, their idiosyncrasy are inverted versions of Winnicott's patterns of the personal, in that the parents appear to slip into a state of agitation in relation to familiar objects, he holds a toy rabbit but in its unstuffed state he confuses it for a hat. The patterns of the personal turn into poses of dislocation as opposed to location, the simulacrum is one of a state of confusion rather than one of satisfaction. In this way the parents illustrate a breakdown in connectivity, where primary associations between self and soothing actions have become uncoupled, it would appear in the process of *becoming* the parent?

Blank Space

If the parents have become uncoupled from patterns of the personal so too, has the space they occupy inside their photographic world. This ambit is very like Winnicott's description of a child at play. 'Into the play area the child gathers objects or phenomena from external reality and uses these in the service of some sample derived from inner or personal reality. Without hallucinating the child puts out a sample of dream potential and lives with this sample in a chosen setting of fragments from external reality.'⁹

The 'play area' F4 occupies in their photographs has over time become equivalent to a blank space, a space open to the imagination. The site is an inky blackness that surrounds them encasing them within the image, isolating them as opposed to locating them in a scene. As in Winnicott's child at play, it is a space that can't be classified as interior or exterior yet it is a space so enclosing that they can neither escape from it nor admit others. It gives the impression of the players being suspended in space as if inside a bell jar.

⁹ Winnicott, Donald. W. *Playing and Reality*. London: Routledge, 2009, 69.



F4: *The Sleeper*. Collection of the James Wallace Trust, 2007

In *The Sleeper* the girl child fingers the apparently sleeping form of a lamb, her sight has been anesthetized by bandages, hovering in a pool of light as if in a memory, blackness defines her relationship to the lamb, which is in fact dead, you are the witness to her loneliness in attesting this fact.

In this blank space, which is a metaphorical place of *play*, the child is alone. Why have her parents abandoned her, leaving her sightless in the face of death? This failure is a mirror of the myriad small failures of family, yet is able to be scrutinised because although sealed within a photograph it is nevertheless the public space of art.

In real life, the daughter in F4 plays with imaginary friends co-opted into the dream space of her day, yet she is playing in an actual playground surrounded by children, who are separated from her by the game she is creating, her game exactingly and concurrently shuts her both in and out. The lack of connection to others whilst occupying the illusionary [transitional] space, is the space this collective mimics; she shows them a way of living within and without simultaneously. She confronts their parental fears of otherness, her strange disturbing private world is designated as her space for play, on the busy public streets she talks to no one yet is deep in conversation, she gesticulates wildly at her own shadows, she reflects their neuroses back at them; she is one of them, a member of the family, the collective, part of them.

The locked black space F4 occupy in their photographs is the space of saturation, its depth is completely annihilating yet it draws the viewer visually and emotionally into the play space.

The endemic breakdown of this family's ability to communicate with one another is like the child in the playground, surrounded yet consciously occupying the eccentric position of the outsider. Winnicott observes that all play has a point where no more can be added, a

moment when it reaches its greatest possible intensity; this refers to one's capacity to enclose experience. Parts of this climax, must by extension also include an inability to take in reality; like a rupture in understanding? In this manner it is possible to conceive of play as a point of rupture with reality, especially when the play disembodies the player so that they act out intangible abstract notions of self in relation to imaginary others.



F4: *The Player*. Collection of the Artists, 2010

In the work *The Player* the child has covered the father's head with her playdough, the father is subject to the child as toy and as such has become a simulacra of the doll, he is adorned, smothered by her game he ceases to be the father and becomes instead the fool.

Through their often-intangible games the children teach the parents how to live in the world, it is the gift the parents receive for the giving up of power. In many respects it is the greater of the gifts, since the power of the parents from the outset was always tenuous. The rupture then is the gift because not only does it show the parents their true selves but it focuses their gaze and confronts them with the question "Who am I?"

The Gaze

In the work of F4 the gaze is noteworthy in any discussion on how power is elucidated, the children continuously confront and question the viewer as if much of this stupidity is due to the existence of the observer. The children do not believe in the viewer as ally, they see the audience as symptomatic of the problem, after all they are drawn from the world of the adult. In Rosalind Krauss's book *The Optical Unconscious*, the atemporal nature of the gaze is discussed in terms of a gap in vision. This *gap* could be said to represent the children's recognition of the viewer as not themselves but as external, of the parental world, a world they are subject to. The children's awareness of the observer as not constituting their desire for power but rather increasing their lack of it, is the moment the gaze differentiates the object from the subject.



F4: *The Challenge*. Collection of the Artists, 2010

This contradiction is also discussed by Krauss in relation to Freud and *The Uncanny*, however, in this instance it is not in relation to children but to adults. Krauss refers to the moment of disintegration when imagination and reality fold in on themselves, as the point where adults through the ‘re-activation’ of primal urges bring instinctual behaviours into being. The adults in F4 occupy that point, they enact childlike states of confusion with the world, abrogating responsibility for their displays of idiocy.

Krauss also references Andre Breton’s quote from Nadja “Who am I?” he begins. “If this once I were to rely on a proverb, then perhaps everything would amount to knowing whom I ‘haunt.’”¹⁰

It can be argued that this subjection of the family to the process of collective art making, is really more about the parents, they are the ones that struggle with reality, the children are at peace with their imagination. In this family, the children simply exist in the moment, there is no crisis of recognition. It will come no doubt and then they will enter fully the dialogue the parents have begun but for now it is the parents who are experiencing the rupture and have co-opted art and family to act out their dislocation in an attempt to understand or confront the personas they have come to *haunt* as adults.

Their artwork is a like mirror image of their family relationships but it is constructed in ‘no-space’ rather than real life because each image is not tied to the temporal but is an enactment, repeated over and over again as ritualised battles over ownership, separation, defiance and demand.

¹⁰ Winnicott, Donald. *W. Playing and Reality*. London: Routledge, 2009, 178

The Conclusion

It has been established that the question “were the children co-opted or did they choose to become a part of the collective?” is not particularly relevant to this investigation of the power and authority within the F4 collective, since every parent (necessarily) makes choices on behalf of their children. However, what is relevant is that co-opting does not mean the same as forced, rather it means *by invitation* and the fact that the children remain within the collective through their own volition offers evidence of the degree to which it provides them a voice.

The other question frequently asked is “how do the children contribute in F4?” Answering this question has been more complicated and as such has occupied the body of this essay. The way the children view the world is essential to both understanding the corporeal qualities of the collective photographs, as well as the way the family acts in the photographs. Their influence is palpable; their existence infuses understanding, their dominion is that of play and they willingly invite the parents into their games and per se teach and offer up insight. The children are a reflection that allows the parents to see themselves more clearly, the resulting image is then made manifest, as artworks by the collective.

In the eyes of the children, the parents are intersubjective entities, which they seek to both claim and challenge. This family is joined in the act of making art, orbiting each other in blank space they are removed from domestic scenery, inhabiting instead a liminality that defines them, a space that is both public and private. The parents are haunted by their past, present and future the children shore up their sense of self, forever locked into the familial embrace.

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Susan Jowsey is an artist and a Lecturer in Graphic Design and Digital Animation in the Department of Design and Visual Arts Unitec, New Zealand. Educated at Auckland University she completed a Bachelors Degree in Education and Sociology and an MPhil in Fine Arts. A founding member of the artist collective F4 comprising Herself, Marcus Williams and their two children Jesse and Mercy Williams. Susan is a multimedia artist working with installation, moving image and photography. She resides in Auckland New Zealand; In 2009 F4 won a major New Zealand award with their work 'The Correction' which enabled them to live in New York for a period of six months as Artists in Resident at the International Studio and Curatorial Program in Brooklyn. Both Susan Jowsey's and F4's works are held in major public and private collections within New Zealand.

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AGING Aging and Society: An Interdisciplinary Journal Website: http://AgingAndSociety.com/journal/	ARTS The International Journal of the Arts in Society. Website: www.Arts-Journal.com
BOOK The International Journal of the Book Website: www.Book-Journal.com	CLIMATE CHANGE The International Journal of Climate Change: Impacts and Responses Website: www.Climate-Journal.com
CONSTRUCTED ENVIRONMENT The International Journal of the Constructed Environment Website: www.ConstructedEnvironment.com/journal	DESIGN Design Principles and Practices: An International Journal Website: www.Design-Journal.com
DIVERSITY The International Journal of Diversity in Organizations, Communities and Nations Website: www.Diversity-Journal.com	FOOD Food Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal Website: http://Food-Studies.com/journal/
GLOBAL STUDIES The Global Studies Journal Website: www.GlobalStudiesJournal.com	HEALTH The International Journal of Health, Wellness and Society Website: www.HealthandSociety.com/journal
HUMANITIES The International Journal of the Humanities Website: www.Humanities-Journal.com	IMAGE The International Journal of the Image Website: www.OntheImage.com/journal
LEARNING The International Journal of Learning. Website: www.Learning-Journal.com	MANAGEMENT The International Journal of Knowledge, Culture and Change Management. Website: www.Management-Journal.com
MUSEUM The International Journal of the Inclusive Museum Website: www.Museum-Journal.com	RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY The International Journal of Religion and Spirituality in Society Website: www.Religion-Journal.com
SCIENCE IN SOCIETY The International Journal of Science in Society Website: www.ScienceinSocietyJournal.com	SOCIAL SCIENCES The International Journal of Interdisciplinary Social Sciences Website: www.SocialSciences-Journal.com
SPACES AND FLOWS Spaces and Flows: An International Journal of Urban and ExtraUrban Studies Website: www.SpacesJournal.com	SPORT AND SOCIETY The International Journal of Sport and Society Website: www.sportandsociety.com/journal
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