

The Kitchen

Sarah Anne Johnson



APRIL 1 - 23, 2016

G44

Centre for
Contemporary
Photography

**IMAGES
FESTIVAL**

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In 1956, Velma Orlikow of Winnipeg checked herself into the respected Allan Memorial Institute in Montreal. She was seeking help from renowned and respected psychiatrist, Dr. Ewen Cameron, to treat her postpartum depression. She wanted to get better for herself, and her family. After three years of on and off treatment, Orlikow was released with debilitating periods of depression, fear of crowds, and an inability to concentrate long enough to read a page of a book. She kept trying to lead the life she had before Cameron treated her, but her persistence only led to continued frustration, which deeply affected those close to her.

Unbeknownst to Orlikow and many other patients, Cameron was conducting MKUltra experimentation, a CIA initiative to develop drug-induced mind control. By the 1980s reports were released casting doubt on Cameron's methods, including a report on the highly disruptive method called "de-patterning" that included sleep deprivation, multiple doses of daily electroshock therapy and other methods that we now understand as interrogation techniques.

While the institutional ramifications of Cameron and the Allen Memorial Institute was a devastating breach of trust, the families of his patients continue to face an unspoken loss through generational trauma. Orlikow's granddaughter, artist Sarah Anne Johnson, grew up aware that something was different about her Nan, whose moods were unpredictable. Johnson's 2009 series, *House on Fire* began to explore her maternal family's story through sculptures and photography. A performance and video, *Dancing with the Doctor* followed in 2011 with several Winnipeg-based dancers including Holly Treddenick, Tanja Woloshan and Ming Hon. Johnson began working on her newest series, a set of performance-based video installations where Johnson herself embodies her grandmother, grandfather, and the doctor through choreographed movements in purpose-built environments that move from institutional, *Hospital Hallway* (2015) to the domestic, *The Kitchen* (2016) to the more intimate spaces of the home in future works to come.

Johnson speaks with Amy Fung, Artistic Director, Images Festival, about her new series, *The Kitchen*, which will premier at Gallery 44 as part of the 29th Images Festival.

Scene: Interior. Brightly lit below ground cafe. Bakers behind a pane of glass are preparing endless loaves of bread for the next day's morning batch. A small sharing platter of meats and pickles are ordered along with two glasses of sparking apple cider. The two characters sit side by side on stools faces parallel with the large pane of glass. They cheers.

Amy Fung: So what do you think it is that we don't talk about enough in the art world? (*scribbles on paper with pen throughout the course of the interview.*)

Sarah Anne Johnson: We talk enough in the art world. We could probably shut up more (*laughs*).

AF: (*adjusts her glasses*) Do you think we talk enough about the important issues though?

SAJ: I think we need to let the artworks speak for themselves. (*beat*) There's too much importance on the writing around artworks. We're being spoon-fed ideas that are not even in the work.

AF: What do you think led us here?

SAJ: Art schools! Everyone is following the same path and becoming over professionalized. (*takes a bread stick*)

AF: You're a full-time working artist. A professional artist in the traditional sense...

SAJ: (*interjecting*) A good artist does *not* need to be "professional"!

AF: But artists are still citizens of the world, are they not?

SAJ: (*beat*) I don't mean a good artist should be a full anarchist, but they need to be able to do their own thing, follow their own instincts, and not worry about whether their work gets them in trouble. You need to make art in whatever way works. You can't be worried about selling.

AF: Do you think about the market very much?

SAJ: Yes and No. I've been making lots of work lately that won't sell (*laughs*), but I also don't have a regular job, so I do need to sell things. (*in a self-reflective tone*) But I have been thinking about getting a job as my work is going more towards performance and I need to supplement my income.

AF: (*finishes her chewing before speaking*) What's prompted the turn towards performance?

SAJ: (*sits up for the first time, alert and excited*) I always thought I would bust it out later at 60, really freak people out. I studied theatre and dance first, and worked as a scenic artist in my early years. It's always been in there, in my thought processes. So I started thinking about dance more in 2011 when Ace Art was going to show the *House on Fire* work, but then that got acquired and a loan became impossible. Being an artist-run centre, they said, 'Do whatever you want; it can be new, it can be crazy, you have



IMAGES Sarah Anne Johnson, video stills from *Hospital Hallway*, 2015



5 weeks, go!' So I made a live dance work called *Dancing with the Doctor*.

(*less excited*) I also tried to make a video of it. I learned a lot with that project. I hired an editor, a sound guy, but in the end it was a horrible waste of money.

AF: (*laughs*) How did the live performance go?

SAJ: Spending three weeks with the dancers was magical. The performances themselves had an overwhelming reception. School groups came. People left all fucked up, but the best was my mom, who I wanted to come to rehearsal to get used to the movements, (*leaning in, emphatic gesture with her hands signaling none*) but she wouldn't come to any of them.

So we had a soft opening preview for family and friends, a safe and controlled space, as I just didn't know how she would react. After the performance, she stayed in her seat and my brother and dad and I formed a protective circle around her, and you could see the tears starting to come to her eyes. She said that during all these years she's been angry with her mother that she never stopped to think about what it was like for her. Now that she's thought about it, she wasn't angry anymore.

(*sitting back again*) So that was the best, as who cares what anyone else thinks after that.

AF: (*takes a deep breath*) It's been four years since you've worked on your grandmother's story again, as you've said it's hard on your mom, on yourself, on everyone, so why now?

SAJ: It's been long enough. When you have an idea and you let it sit for too long in your head (*gestures towards her brain*) without acting on it, you can ruin it. This project has been in my mind for so long, that bringing it back to reality is hard! But I received some grant money and it has to happen now (*laughs*).

AF: How do you know when you're done with a project?

SAJ: (*throwing her hands outward*) When I run out of time. Thankfully when I build a big sculpture, there's a definite end, which I like, but when I'm creating a new photo show, it can just go on forever.

AF: What about time-based works like video and performance?

SAJ: Looking at *Hospital Hallway* now, I would like to reshoot everything. Make slight changes, but sometimes,

you just have to accept it for what it is, learn your lessons and do better next time. *Hospital Hallway* and *The Kitchen* (when it's done), are both part of a much larger project. I'm going to build many rooms—a hospital, a house—and each piece will be its own thing. Each will stand on its own, but I would love to show them altogether when they are done. I think there will be 6-13 rooms in total. It's going to take a few years to complete. (*raises one eyebrow and leans in*). I've got big plans!

AF: (*adjusts her glasses*) How does your photography and sculpture practice relate to what you're doing right now?

SAJ: What's really informing my work right now is my dance and theatre background. I'm finally connecting to my old skills that I haven't used in a long time and using everything I've got. I'm making each set, directing, costume making, all of it. (*beat*) I also play all the characters. It's terrifying.

AF: What keeps you going then?

SAJ: With this work particularly, it's an opportunity to sit down and talk with my mother about her own difficulty with the past. I get to learn more about who she is and why she is and who I am and why I am. (*leans back and gestures toward her self*) For example, I'm told that when I cook, I am not a great person to be around. I can cook for myself easy enough, but when there is the pressure of cooking for others I'm so tense and anxious it makes everyone uncomfortable. This is learned experience. My grandmother would have a horrible time in the kitchen. She's trying to make everything perfect, but had a really difficult time with it. Making this work offers me the opportunity to unpack that anxiety and examine it from the best way I know how, by making art about it.

The 1950s kitchen setting for *The Kitchen* is about the anxiety and frustration of trying to prepare a feast for your loved ones, but *not* being able to. My grandmother was so broken, but she kept trying. This is not my story, it's her's, and it's about her determination and self-will to keep trying to hold it all down for her family after everything she went through. It was impossible, and courageous, and even though her story is extreme, I think a lot of people can relate to her struggle.

(*end*)

Cover, Poster, Right Images:
Sarah Anne Johnson, video stills
from *The Kitchen*, 2016

Gallery 44 Centre for Contemporary Photography is a non-profit artist-run centre committed to photography as a multi-faceted and ever-changing art form. Founded in 1979 to establish a supportive environment for the development of photography, Gallery 44's mandate is to provide a context for reflection and dialogue on contemporary photography and its related practices. Gallery 44 offers exhibition and publication opportunities to national and international artists, award-winning education programs, and affordable production facilities for artists. Through its programs Gallery 44 is engaged in changing conceptions of the photographic image and its modes of production.

Established in Toronto in 1987, the **Images Festival** has grown to become the largest vanguard experimental moving image culture festival in North America. Focusing on local, national, and international independent and experimental works of contemporary media, Images has presented and premiered thousands of trailblazing and artistically innovative moving image projects across cinematic, gallery-based, and live platforms. Committed to an expanded concept of moving image practice: Images Festival's programming is divided into presents three sections: ON SCREEN (presentations in the cinema), OFF Screen (exhibitions in galleries, museums, and pop-ups), and LIVE IMAGES (presentations of live and performing arts).

Sarah Anne Johnson was born in 1976 in Winnipeg, Manitoba. She received her BFA from the University of Manitoba and completed her MFA at The Yale School of Art. Johnson's work has been exhibited in numerous solo and group exhibitions internationally. She is the recipient of numerous grants and awards and is included in several distinguished collections. Currently, she lives in Winnipeg. She is represented by Julie Saul Gallery in New York, Stephen Bulger in Toronto, and Division Gallery in Montreal.

Amy Fung is a writer currently based in Toronto. Since Fall 2014, she has been the Artistic Director of The Images Festival.



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Gallery 44 wishes to acknowledge the Exhibition Programming Committee: Steven Beckly, Noa Bronstein, Francisco-Fernando Granados, Charlene Heath, Zoe Jaremus, Alexandra Majerus, Caoimhe Morgan-Feir, Leila Timmins, Ellyn Walker

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