

This essay accompanies the exhibition *100 Stories About My Grandmother* by Peter Kingstone
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Gallery TPW gallerytpw.ca

Soliciting for the Purpose

by Thomas Waugh

Peter Kingstone's *100 Stories About My Grandmother* is a unique video installation composed of interviews the artist has conducted on digital video over the last year, mostly in Canada, but also in the U.S. and Europe. What his subjects have in common is that they are all male prostitutes, and that they are all reminiscing about their grandmothers. The interviews, with a total running time of six hours, are set up at four viewing stations in Gallery TPW's space, and each is dressed to reference a grandmother's living room—complete with the compulsory old couch and bowl of sweets. The interviews vary in length from 45 seconds to 22 minutes. Most of the men are twentysomething, but some are younger and some are in their forties and even older. Some are sedentary and well-rooted homeboys, others prototypically migratory transnationals of the 21st century. Most are brazenly upfront, but a few are discreet, some in their rentboy street finery, some in Wal-Mart drab. The range of tone is amazing, from bitter to sentimental (even melodramatic), from humorous to stunned, talkative to terse, passionate to matter-of-fact, charming to dull, clichéd

to profoundly original. Kingstone says he's giving a voice to those who have been voiceless, and this is true. You might have thought that the talking-head close-up is the Canadian audio-visual trope par excellence, thanks to our dubious documentary heritage at the NFB and the CBC, and that nothing new could ever be done with such a tired setup. Kingstone would have proven you wrong.

Kingstone, a thirtysomething graduate of Trent and York Universities, has produced dozens of video shorts and gallery works in the present decade alone—works about growing up/out queer, family, storytelling, art, media, relationships, and, of course, sex. He effectively straddles the film and art worlds, and embraces the community festival scene as well. His most recent breakthrough in the latter zone was last year's feature film *The Astounding Adventures of Strongman and Quickboy*, a fine Canadian entry into the current international wave that deploys sexually explicit idioms to narrativize the lives of 21st-century real-world people who fuck. It's also a very Canadian road movie that romanticizes driving to Sudbury and grafts comic strip fantasy onto our

Angel, Miami, FL, USA

We went down near the water and she started to tell me that she used to swim. And she would be trying out for the Olympics. And I was like, I looked at her and said "What?" and I said "Are you serious?" like you know, my grandmother trying out for the Olympic swimming? I was like, "I didn't even know you knew how to swim." And then she commenced to tell me the story of how she had to blow out her ear drums in order to dive deeper because in Cape Verde at that time there wasn't the technology to have ear plugs or anything like that so either you took that sacrifice to do what you wanted to do strongly or it wasn't something you did.





Boystown, Vancouver, BC, Canada

Some of the things my grandma says are “friends bring you come but don’t bring you go” meaning friends will say “Come with me and help me do this.” But when it’s time for them to come help you do that they are not into it.

My grandma looks down at all the people on Hastings and points out that everyone is someone’s child and they are not all just druggies or whatever.



Greg, London, UK

Hi, I’m Greg Mitchell, and I will talk to you about my grandmother. Or one of my grandmothers. This grandmother is Greek, or was Greek. She was born way back in 1900.

She met my grandfather when she was quite young. She met him in the First World War when he used to be an officer in the army, he used to be parading outside her house and she would go out to meet him. She was only 16 and he was 26 and her parents knew nothing about it. So she was being a bit naughty.

landscapes. In a way, *Strongman and Quickboy* and *100 Stories* both seem like a sequel to one of Kingstone’s earliest and most minimal works, a three-minute tape called *I’m Thinking About Changing My Job* (2001). In that short, a voyeuristic high-angle single take views a baseball-capped youth loitering on the street, soliciting and negotiating with a prospective buyer, then walking off with his new john. Meanwhile, the voyeur meditates on the soundtrack, in his very Steve-Reinke confessional whine, about his boredom in his nine-to-five cubicle and his dreams of becoming a prostitute too: “I wish I would stop looking out the window and jump in, wishing my work was bliss.” Kingstone, of course, knows sexwork is not bliss, but he also knows, unlike the culture at large, that it’s work as well as sex. In fact, he takes this so much for granted that he’d rather hear his subjects talk about something else.

The “something else” is, of course, the men’s grandmothers. Why grandmothers? Kingstone is very upfront about the fact that the origins of his work exist in a kind of genealogical anxiety. Behind these stories loom the British immigrant grandmother Kingstone never knew, and the evidence that her livelihood was sexwork as she settled into the New World and founded her family. It is an artwork whose hundred voices help Kingstone imaginatively reach back and solicit the meaning of these roots, his identity, his queerness, his art, and his lineage of blood and kinship.

100 Stories offers a range of performance styles, as one might expect from such an expansive project: some subjects are clearly suggestible and too eager to please, while others betray the awkwardness of the contradictory setup. Yet successful sexworkers have to be good communicators, and most of the interviewees are magically spontaneous, voluble, and natural, with eyes that light up at the memory of that formidable fragrant lap, that stinging strap, that intergenerational intimacy. There is a strong sense of place and history in the men’s stories; one senses the poetic texture of their regional, ethnic, and class cultures and dialects (they’re a Canadian nationalist’s dream!). And Kingstone’s lucid and transparent visual style—honest, understated and respectful—matches the trust his subjects place in him and in us. It is the everyday quality of the setups, their frontality, that permits us to concentrate on the stories in which they have invested so much.

We inhabit a culture where confession is a commodity, and these one hundred men share their confessional intensity with Oprah’s legions. But the important difference is that Kingstone and his men reject her victim ethics and her trauma aesthetics. *100 Stories* flies in the face of the entire audio-visual abuse industry that has proliferated in this country and elsewhere since the 1970s, despite the undeniable presence among Kingstone’s group of several who are clearly survivors of very unpleasant childhoods, if not of physical and societal abuse. His prosaic assemblage of

Jon, Ottawa, ON, Canada

So my grandmother was raised in a rural town in New Brunswick. And she was a very very bitter old cow. I... my first memory of her was... I went to visit her in her apartment and she was really really really mean to me. And, that's my first memory of her and ever since then I've seen her a lot we got pretty close. Then I didn't see her for a bit, and then we got close again and we just talked about her life and stuff. She was married in a pretty much loveless marriage and she had a bunch of kids and she lived in an old house in the woods and every so often she would go meet men in the woods and proceed to engage in coitus. And so, she was a bitter woman but very promiscuous until her very very old age. And she was very open about everything and very honest about everything. Whenever there was something in her mind she would always just blurt it out and it didn't bother her if it was going to offend anybody or not. It was just really whatever, well, fuck you. And she did swear a lot and I think that's where I got my trucker's mouth. And she could also be very very proper, but all of our time spent together it was always... *mean* is a very harsh thing to say, it was more brutally honest. And it was just always... whenever we would be together she would just tell me stories about her past or be bitching about how terrible her life is and being extremely bitter like 95 year old women tend to do. She always had her back straight and was very very proper in every thing she did and she drilled that into my head, I was really really close to her and a couple of years ago she passed away. And it was very very sad, my mother was pretty happy, it still affected me because we had started to get close again, and then she died like 95 year old women tend to do. But, I really have to give her a lot of credit for the things that I've learned. She taught me a lot of things about the world, like self esteem, even though she was really bitter, she was able to boost my self esteem and give me the confidence to do whatever I



wanted to do, and not worry about how it's going to... not really worry about how it will affect people, not let it be what makes me make decisions. Of course, not like I'm going to drive real fast cause I wanna, but gave me the confidence to say you know... to say what's on my mind and be able to do what I want to do. And *that* I have to give her credit for. We were really really close. We had good times together over coffee and alcohol. Once again, as 95 year old women tend to do. No, she was really big on propriety to a certain level because that's how she grew up, in the old, old, old, old old, old, old, old, old time, where no matter what—you had to be proper. And if you were going to say something about somebody it had to be really nice, or something mean said in a nice way so it doesn't seem like you are saying anything mean at all. Which again I have to give her credit for, she taught me how to do that. It was fantastic. But, yeah that's the way it really was with my grandmother, everything was really out there, she wasn't the type of woman to keep secrets from anybody. If she thought something about someone she would tell you, and I have to respect her for that even though she was a bitch sometimes but it all turned out in the end. But yeah thats it.

stories of kinship, nurturing, and coming of age constitutes an artistic defiance of the sanctimonious narratives of blame, trauma, addiction, rescue, conversion, recovered memory, healing, and closure, and this defiance may be a hard swallow in the culture at large.

I don't want to play favorites, but one of the very special figures in Kingstone's panoply is Jon, the transplanted New Brunswicker from Ottawa, whose hard and thick-bespectacled face exhibits none of the conventional prettiness of Alexandre, the Byelorussian blond, or of Tony, the affable Montreal brunette whose coyly revealed armpit nearly steals the whole show. All of the one hundred subjects have their

stories, but I love the way Jon mingles his original child's fear and anger at his grandmother with his begrudging respect, as an adult, for the bitter survivor she became, enduring until the age of ninety-five. Also intriguing is the fact that Jon, in contrast to many of the others, actually talks about sex—but why does he use the Latinate word “coitus” to describe what his grandmother did in the woods with all those men? Is it because he's confusing Kingstone's video camera with Oprah's studio broadcast apparatus and doesn't want to be bleeped, or is it an instinct to dignify his role by appearing literate, polysyllabic, and professional? “She was a bitter woman,” Jon says, “but she was promiscuous until



Zachary, Vancouver, BC, Canada

I have kinda one vague memory of my grandma. I was like 3, 3 and a half, I was running across, like streaking across the family main room. And I just have a memory of her perking her head up looking around and going “My, doesn’t he have a big truck!” and it sorta set my confidence level in that way for the rest of my life.

her very old age.” His verbal affectation and his wonderful illogicality (why “bitter *but* promiscuous?”) bespeak a distinctive sensibility—a conflict, perhaps, between hurt and respect. But most important, I think, is that they bespeak a complex identification across the generations, a bond between male whore and ancestral female slut. This piece is about, among many other things, patriarchy within private life, its role in men’s socialization (so many of these men offer variations of the trope, “she taught me this and how I value this lesson!”... and, without the slightest trace of irony, “she made me what I am today”). There might not be an underlying sociological treatise here about how male prostitutes have special relationships with their female ancestors, but how fascinating it is to feel patriarchal empowerment leap across generations and genders in these interviews, and now leap across the technological divide of the artistic experience, from documentary subject to artist and spectator.

When I first started following *100 Stories*, then still a video installation-in-progress, in the summer of 2007, and later presented a preview in January in Regina, I had the sense that this remarkable work was filling in the blanks. My first impression was that Kingstone was restoring the hustler from a kind of cultural invisibility. I felt he was re-situating him—his image, body, and voice—within a Canadian sexual landscape that keeps him hidden, despite its being so torn up with cultural and political upheavals

over sex, money, exploitation, sexwork, pornography, intergenerational sexuality, and age of consent. Since then, I’ve realized that this is both true and not true, for hustlers are in fact everywhere—but only if you look.

The hustler has appeared in other recent Canadian works as well. This past winter season, for example, saw a controversy erupt in the Quebec film scene over the prematurely halted postproduction of the documentary feature *Hommes à louer* (Men for Rent). Filmmaker Rodrigue Jean went public with his frustration and anger over his producers’ attempts to water down and censor his work, which he considers finished, and as of this writing, the project is in limbo. Jean’s video has mercifully been allowed one screening, and clearly has similar objectives to *100 Stories*. What synchrony has produced these two works echoing each other across Canada’s linguistic divide, despite the fundamental differences in format (one is a two-and-a-half hour TV-bound documentary, the other a video installation on the gallery circuit)?

An answer may be found in the fact that both pieces come in the wake of last year’s salacious headlines of the fallen mighty, from venomous American televangelist Ted Haggard, who was brought low thanks to Mike Jones, the “masseur”/crystal meth supplier who squealed, to the CEO of British Petroleum, Lord Browne, who saw his career bite the dust after lying to the media about how he’d met his “ex,” a Canadian escort named Jeff Chevalier. Meanwhile, the number of my students, both male and female, who supplement their incomes at ten cents a dance does not quite (to my knowledge) exceed the fingers on two hands—but that’s still a lot of fingers. All this to say that the whore, including the male whore, is not exactly missing. In fact, now that same-sex marriage is old hat, the whore has become a lightning rod for our continued societal panics around gender and sexuality.

Every classical Hollywood western and film noir had its token prostitute, with her tenderness, generosity, virtue, and love buried deep inside—and she inevitably had to die for it. Male whores were only slightly more discreet—think of the Glenn Ford character in Columbia Pictures’ *Gilda*, clearly a 1946 anticipation of Jeff Chevalier. More explicit male whores crept into the American cinema a bit later, from *Midnight Cowboy*’s Joe Buck (1969) to *My Own Private Idaho*’s toothsome twosome Keanu Reeves and River Phoenix (1991), and though they all emerged in a post-classical, post-morality climate, with respectable queer authorship, there was a very classical smell of death in both of these movies as well.

Canadian film and video have for at least the last generation also had their particular obsession with sexworkers. Some of the canonical works of English Canadian cinema have in their very titles a central focus on sexwork: I am thinking of *Hookers on Davie*, Janis Cole and Holly Dale’s pioneering

documentary from 1984, or Bruce LaBruce's pseudo-doc art feature from the next decade, *Hustler White* (1996). From Quebec in the same era came *Being at Home with Claude* (1993), a theatrical adaptation. Thanks to Roy Dupuis's overacting as a hustler who has killed his boyfriend, it was as intense and melodramatic as LaBruce's film was pom-wry and tongue-in-...well, you know where. Recently, there has been a cycle of hustler movies in Toronto, comprised of three very honest and effective fictional narratives, each with a one-word title: *Touch* (2001), *Twist* (2003), and *Sugar* (2004). And let's not forget Mirha-Soleil Ross, the most famous and prolific whore-activist-artist in Canada, whose video-performances have been raw and electrifying.

So is there any respect in which the whore, specifically the male whore, is missing? Yes—and it's political, duh. No one reading this needs whore-killer Robert Pickton, nor Tory MP Tom Lukiwski's hate speech about disease-bearing homos, to remind us how any discussion of sexwork within the current discursive regime is already always political, or that the criminalization of prostitution is a major means of keeping this political disturbance invisible. The minority Tories have consistently blocked any updating of the sexwork items in the Criminal Code, stalling any effort to remove criminalization and Victorian morality from the law—clauses about such things as bawdy houses, soliciting, anal sex, and “living off the avails”—not to mention, as we go to press, their shameful obstinacy in having finally succeeded in raising the age of consent and their panicked determination to censor “offensive” films and television as well. Kingstone's men do not really talk very much about politics, and seldom talk about work or sex. Rather, they talk about their lives and childhoods and families, their feelings and memories; all this is detached from the moralistic problematics of social work and youth protection. And it is precisely in this talk, these voices, this performance of agency and humanity rather than silence, symbolification, and objecthood, that Kingstone's piece is intensely political.

The fact that *Hustler White*, *Touch*, and *Sugar* all had important creative input from sexworkers and former sexworkers does not alter the fact that we approach those feature films as works of fiction, dream universes (however gritty) with an entirely different connection to our spectatorial subjectivity than the nonfiction works by Dale and Cole, Ross, Jean, and Kingstone. We watch these nonfiction works enchanted by the ring of “truth” and “the real,” caught up in the dynamics of belief and empathy. Regardless of how sophisticated we might be about the filters imposed by the documentary author, her/his artistic subjectivity, and the rhetorical codes of documentary, we listen to these voices within a specific ethical relationship with characters who have roots in the world Out There.

Kingstone is in very good company within the tradition of both fiction and nonfiction, but stands apart from both.



Alexandre, London, UK

Hi, I'm here to tell a story about my grandmother. She was born in what used to be Soviet Russia, or USSR at that time in the republic called Belarus... she was born in a poor rural area just before the great patriotic Second World War started.

She told me lots of stories about her childhood, how difficult it was, and how horrified people were, the things she had to go through, like her friends being killed, like little boys and stuff like that.

I have only seen twenty-one of his interviews, and not in an installation context, but I think I know what he's up to. *100 Stories* is not only a counter-stereotype operation, it's also an interactive engagement, both artistic and ethical, with the one hundred men he has solicited, men who practice one of the most vilified professions in our culture. I am amazed by the originality and simplicity of Kingstone's project—above all by the generosity of these encounters and his generosity in sharing them with us.

Only a few of Kingstone's subjects opted for the confidentiality so beloved of the prurient canons of the social sciences and journalism, hiding their faces in either shame or prudence (one of these is an immigrant and the second is accusatory). The others are not only upfront, but also, as with Jon, exhibit a matter-of-fact pride in their identities. Almost a third of the men I have listened to even go so far as to volunteer their names or their grandmothers' names or both: this brazen politics of naming is something that must make the funding councils' ethics commissariats shudder. I would like to meet some of these grandmothers brought to life in these interviews, though most are no longer with us. Even more I would like to meet some of these men solicited by Kingstone and performing with such bravado. As a sometime john, and thus a member of the latest affinity

group of sexual identity politics to be rehabilitated through the political sacrament of coming out—if we are to believe Mirha-Soleil Ross’s manifesto performance in *Yapping Out Loud: Contagious Thoughts from an Unrepentant Whore* (2002)—these voices speak to me with brutal tenderness and seduction. Although these men hardly ever talk about sex or work, paradoxically they speak to me about both, between the lines, as well as about the women who shaped their lives. Thanks to Peter Kingstone, these men are not missing figures; they are both grandsons and whores as well as art stars, and we are very much in his debt and their debt. We should all be charged with “living off the avails.”



Richard, Vancouver, BC, Canada

In summertime when school was out, with bank card in my pocket and nothing else, I would hop a ride with my dad into work one day and he would drop me off on Windermere Street, in East Van, at my grandmother’s place where I would spend the bulk of my summer vacation living in Vancouver, going to the PNE. Or I would go with my grandmother and the rest of the family and we would all pile into a station wagon, subsequently that’s where the term ‘Indianmobile’ would come from because we would

pack as many of them as we could into the car. And we would go to places like Seattle and go to pow wows.

I think the kids had more brains than the adults had at the time because you know we spent our money on food not booze. That was until we got older though. I’m the only kid I know that had 7, 8, \$9,000 in the bank and would come to Vancouver and I was actually buying booze for my grandmother and my uncles and that.

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ABOUT THE ARTIST

Kingstone holds a Philosophy/Cultural Studies Degree from Trent University in Peterborough, Ontario, and Masters of Fine Arts from York University, Toronto, Ontario. His work has been shown across Canada and throughout the United States. Most recently *Charles L. Roberts: The War Years* in January 2008 at A Space Gallery. He won the Untitled Artist Award in 2005 for his installation *The Strange Case of Peter K. (1974–2004)*.

ABOUT THE WRITER

Thomas Waugh has taught film studies since 1976 at Concordia University where he has also developed programs in queer studies and curriculum on HIV/AIDS. Curator, critic, activist and author, his books are *The Right to Play Oneself: Essays on Documentary 1976–2008* (forthcoming 2008); *Comin’ At Ya! The Homoerotic 3-D Photographs of Denny Denfield*, with David L. Chapman (2007); *Gay Art: A Historic Collection* (ed., introduction & captions) By Felix Lance Falkon [1972] (2006); *The Romance of Transgression in Canada: Queering Sexualities, Nations, Cinemas* (2006); *Lust Unearthed: Vintage Gay Graphics from the Dubek Collection* (With Willie Walker, 2004); *Out/Lines: Gay Underground Graphics from before Stonewall* (2002); *The Fruit Machine: Twenty Years of Writings on Queer Cinema* (2000); *Hard to Imagine: Gay Male Eroticism in Photography and Film from their Beginnings to Stonewall* (1996); and *“Show Us Life”: Towards a History and Aesthetics of the Committed Documentary* (1984).

Images: Peter Kingstone, video stills from *100 Stories About My Grandmother*, 2007

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