

MIT List Visual Arts Center  
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# LIST PROJECTS 21: Rami George

March 19–May 17, 2020



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Wandering the Davis Square neighborhood of Somerville where parked cars dot residential streets, the opening sequence of Rami George's video essay *Untitled (with my father)* (2020) marks something of a homecoming for the artist. George's recent visits to the area were their first since 1995, when they moved to Portland, Oregon, with their father and sister. The young family's departure from Massachusetts was precipitated by a number of difficult events—the death of a beloved pet, an imminent divorce, an emergency custody hearing. Each was a reverberation of an ordinary tumult: in 1993, the artist's mother, Nelli, became enthralled with the teachings of a new age spiritual cult known as the Samaritan Foundation. Late that summer, she left their home to join the group's commune at an abandoned prison in Guthrie, Oklahoma, bringing both children with her.

Based on the transcript of a 2013 conversation the artist recorded with their father, Jonathan, as he recollects the arc of these events, the video surveys the artist's childhood home, family photographs, personal mail, and legal documents around court proceedings with an even-handed attention to each detail. At times, audio and image enter into direct relationship, with paperwork or a child's saved school assignment seeming to offer evidence of the described events. At other moments, sound and image depart from one another, puncturing the notion of a single, cohesive narrative—a distancing furthered by the voice of a reader speaking the part of the artist's father, while the artist re-performs the questions they asked him. As the video slips between the supposed authenticity of lived experience and the artifice of performance, the conversation between parent and child opens up to consider how Nelli eventually left the Samaritan Foundation for the Greek Orthodox church; how Jonathan's decision to relocate the family to Oregon was informed, in part, by his desire to be closer to an ashram community there (which he remains a member of); and, finally, Jonathan's observation that individuals who choose to live outside the cultural mainstream are often perceived as a threat by those subscribing to dominant mores.

Within an exhibition architecture designed by the artist and based loosely on the floorplan for the Seminar Room in the Foundation's encampment in the Guthrie prison, *Untitled (with my father)* premieres alongside *Untitled (Saturday, October 16, 1993)* (2015), which also addresses the family's entanglement with the Samaritan Foundation. In the earlier work, an unseen narrator reads a report on the Samaritans and the George family's emergency custody hearing that was published in an Oklahoma newspaper. Still images of the stories, photographs, and advertisements elsewhere in that day's paper furnish the voice-over, presenting the periodical as both an enduring chronicle of events and a banal theater of the everyday. Troubling the notion of a single objective truth, the two videos, made five years apart, offer different perspectives on the same events—one deeply subjective and vulnerable to the short-circuitry of memory, and the other purporting objectivity, but also pandering to sensationalism. A group of new works on paper collage dowsing charts and other instructive texts generated by the Samaritan Foundation with family photographs and ephemera. The associative relationships George forms in these assemblages, together with the exhibition's architecture, carve out a space of psychic interiority in which manifold ideologies and memories coalesce.

Throughout the exhibition, George bears witness to how, by choice or by circumstance, those within and adjacent to the Samaritan community were affected by events that correspond

with and exceed the artist's own memories. Integrating Samaritan Foundation teachings, legal documents, and recollections from their father, these works also look beyond, and complicate, the media-driven narratives of the group's activities. Consciously withholding judgement, George instead invites larger questions around the social formation of so-called intentional communities, and probes how trauma, idealism, and a desire for belonging circulate within these groups and motivate those affiliated with them.

## ABOUT THE ARTIST

Rami George (b. 1989, Somerville, MA) lives and works in Philadelphia.

*List Projects 21: Rami George* is organized by Selby Nimrod, Assistant Curator, MIT List Visual Arts Center.

## PUBLIC PROGRAMS

### Screening and Discussion

Friday, January 31, 1:00 PM

With Rami George

**All programs are free and open to the public. RSVPs are required.**

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## SUPPORT

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