Linda Duvall and Peter Kingstone
Living in 10 Easy Lessons

OCTOBER 26 TO DECEMBER 1 2012

G44 CENTRE FOR CONTEMPORARY PHOTOGRAPHY
Lesson 7

1) Don’t carry anything important in your purse, and you’ll be fine.

2) Keep your money in your bra, wig, boots, anything on the right hand side.

3) Higher bills like 50’s and 100’s go in a boot, but 20’s are in a bra.

4) While they’re ringing it up they’re occupied, and then your hand goes in, takes out a 20, and pays for it.

5) Don’t take change.

Lesson 3

1) Get a cup from either Starbucks or Tim Hortons and sit down.

2) Pick Metro or No Frills or beer stores or liquor stores.

3) First of all get eye contact.

4) Say “How are you today? Can you scare some change?” cause they don’t know what you’re there for.

5) Ask for change because it seems so upfront to ask for large denominations.

After they give, say “Thank you very much”, or “God bless” and “Take care.”
We are privileged to share *Living in 10 Easy Lessons*, a challenging new work by Linda Duvall and Peter Kingstone. Duvall and Kingstone have each previously pursued artworks predicated on a personal engagement with strangers. For this collaborative project they asked ten street-involved women to share a skill that each uses in her day-to-day life. These lessons were documented on video and then developed by the artists into a learning package consisting of videos, posters and instructional booklets. By playing form off of content, Duvall and Kingstone’s straightforward pedagogical project unleashes a myriad of social issues in one’s mind and leads to a consideration of personal bias and privilege.

Upon visiting the installation, it is left to each viewer to decide for themselves the worthiness of the project’s undertaking. What I appreciate is the artists’ unflinching engagement with their subjects and their viewers in bridging a gap of knowledge and understanding. Duvall and Kingstone have actively sought to engage the reactions of people to *Living in 10 Easy Lessons*. To this end, they invited writer and curator Cheyanne Turions to write on their project, and responded positively when she returned a text that is critical, direct and sincere. Gallery 44’s exhibition of this work is accompanied by a panel discussion co-presented by the Ryerson School of Social Work, which will see speakers who work in social services, teaching, and the arts come together to discuss *Living in 10 Easy Lessons*.

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Alice Dixon | Head of Exhibitions and Publications
**LIVING IN 10 EASY LESSONS**

by cheyanne turions

If you were asked to teach a lesson about a skill you use daily, what would that skill be? What would it say about your own life, and how would that reflect on the person on the other end of the relationship, the student if you will? Why is the student there, asking, listening? What happens between the two of you in this exchange of tactics? These are some of the first questions that rise up in response to Linda Duvall’s and Peter Kingstone’s new work, *Living in 10 Easy Lessons*, but they are definitely not the last. Comprised of a set of video works that document the teaching of these ten lessons, a poster series highlighting relatable aspects of each skill, and a chapbook that collects the teachings into an instructional booklet, *Living in 10 Easy Lessons* sets up a pedagogical relationship between the two artists and their instructors, but with the hope to complicate social assumptions around what these kinds of teaching and learning relationships can look like. You see, the skills laid out in this project bear little resemblance to those we learned in high school through career and life management classes. These skills are tougher. These skills are about a different type of survival. They are about how to fake a fuck, how to deal drugs, how to panhandle, and they are real skills used in the everyday lives of the people presenting them. Though it is not mentioned explicitly, one can infer that the instructors are street-involved. Duvall and Kingstone seem not to be. Yet, instead of the usual orientation of skill-sharing that would aim to facilitate a stable and socially acceptable way of life, these lessons make visible what are oftentimes undervalued and invisible skills for getting by when life doesn’t take the shape of the North American dream. In the artists’ reversing of the pedagogical hierarchy, an appropriate reaction is a healthy skepticism about why and for whom this work was produced, a curiosity toward the artists’ connection to the situation they place themselves within, and a questioning of the artists’ motivations. In the spirit of the dialogue, of taking an idea seriously by playing it out, I would like to pose a series of questions in response to this curriculum.

What does it mean that the artists do not acknowledge their organizing principle to their audience? Duvall and Kingstone sought out their teachers at a resource centre in downtown Toronto that “offers a safe, welcoming place for homeless women.” However, the artists do not name this organizing principle within the work and the participants are presented, simply, as women with skills. It is by virtue of the nature of the skills shared that a viewer can surmise that these are women who may not have stable housing or employment, and whose day-to-day lives are characterized by high levels of precarity. When first encountering *Living in 10 Easy Lessons*, this withholding of information on Duvall and Kingstone’s behalf is obviously deliberate, but it also feels a bit manipulative, as though the artists are orchestrating a situation to condescend a viewer’s surprise at detecting a set of practical challenges that are shared amongst the women. However, it is precisely this reaction that the artists intend to disrupt. Duvall and Kingstone are engaged in a productive undoing of social norms. Rather than schooling these women in skills and behaviours that are socially palatable,

1 Though it is not mentioned explicitly, one can infer that the instructors are street-involved.
3 “Precarity,” when used to describe a way of life, invokes “how large parts of the population are being subjected to flexible exploitation...[low pay, high blackmailability, intermittent income, etc.], and existential precariousness (high risk of social exclusion because of low income, welfare cuts, high cost of living, etc.). The condition of precarity is said to affect...particularly youth, women, and immigrants.” “Precarity,” Wikipedia. www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Precarity?Precarity.in.Europe (accessed May 13, 2012).
such as financial management, the artists create a situation that presumes an objective value in the everyday skills these women use to survive. While there are parallels to be drawn between one skill paradigm and another—such as when a woman describing her drug dealing philosophy talks about building trust between herself and her customers, much like a small business person would—there is a brutal honesty to Duvall and Kingstone’s requests for knowledge sharing that does not deny the lives these women are actually leading. That is, the artists create a space for the reception of the facts of their instructors’ lives in a way that challenges a dismissal of these tactics as socially inappropriate or aesthetically unsavoury. These ten lessons are valuable in precisely the same way as those taught at the centre itself.

4 An example of classes that have been previously offered include ceramics, cooking, financial management, computer skills, and literacy. From a phone conversation with the Adelaide Resource Centre receptionist, May 28, 2012.

5 In a conversation with Duvall, she challenged my notion of the centre assuming economic stability, saying that, for instance, “in the writing classes the women are encouraged to find their own voices [based on their real experiences], et cetera. Rather, the centre doesn’t use the women’s existing skills as a starting point, and I suspect that they hope that their skill classes will head the women in another/better direction, so there is an assumption of change.” From an email conversation with the artist, June 1, 2012.

6 From the Living in 10 Easy Lessons project proposal to Gallery 44.

What does it mean that these women are publicly revealing their strategies for survival? What does their consent to participate mean in this particular context? While Duvall and Kingstone take seriously the circumstances of these women’s lives, Living in 10 Easy Lessons also has the effect of identifying the instructors in perpetuity as who they were at one moment in time. While these women have consented to participating in an art project that aims “to provide a context for learning and acknowledging some of these traditionally undervalued skills,” an effect is that the women are now marked as having been prostitutes, drug dealers, liars, poor. These facts may not always serve them best, and so what does consent to participate in this project mean when, one day, the teachers may not want their faces to be connected to the skills they espouse here? What if they find permanent housing and seek employment, only to be interviewed by someone who has seen this project? What does it mean that these women are revealing their strategies for survival when, in some cases, their safety is better served by secrecy? For example, what good is it to “lie, deny and act surprised” as a means of saving money if people know this is your strategy? Sure, it may be unlikely that someone viewing this work may later be opposite one of these women, but does that unlikelihood alleviate the duty to consider the consequences of participation in this project on the lives of the women who revealed so much of themselves?

There is a broader project that Duvall and Kingstone, through Living in 10 Easy Lessons, are participating in, which relates to a shifting cultural acceptance toward the multiplicity of lives lived today, that be we rich or poor, our experiences are of equal (pedagogical) value. The hard truth is that this is not yet reality and people are sometimes punished for living lives that do not conform to social ideals. However, as Duvall points out, “inherent in the idea of [the women] being eventually ashamed of their activities is a judgment about these activities, an assumption that one should hide them... At the core of this question is an assumption that one should keep one’s history secret. This is really unhelpful for the women involved [and] for the larger society.” In watching this work, it becomes our responsibility to participate in the social paradigm shift necessary to meet the vulnerability that these women have displayed. We all struggle. In a tender state of honesty, a recognition of another’s challenges in our own becomes a powerful connection to make in unravelling social stereotypes and negative assumptions about different ways of living.

7 From an email conversation with the artist, May 23, 2012.
Does this project reinforce negative behaviour?
When the artists propositioned the resource centre about working with their clients, this question was posed to Duvall and Kingstone. There is a moral judgement built into this question, but it is one that accurately reflects social norms and, in some cases, the deleterious effects of behavioural feedback cycles (for instance, an addicted person sells drugs to make the money to maintain their addiction). In this climate of moral judgement, the skills of these women are invisible and unvalued. When coupled with our current social formations (such as the criminalization of drug use, some aspects of sex work or “aggressive” panhandling), their skills are not useful. To shift this understanding and see their skills as valuable, it requires a broader context of interpretation, one that takes seriously the real context of their implementation, which can encompass housing and employment instability, drug addiction or mental illness. A revealing question might consider the relationship of these women to their skills: what are their emotional, practical and intellectual relationships to using these skills in their everyday lives? In the context of Living in 10 Easy Lessons, it seems a missed opportunity that Duvall and Kingstone do not engage the morality, politics, or efficacy of the skills of the participants (at least not as part of the videos). Learning is more than the relation of a step-by-step process. Deep learning involves critical engagement, not polite deferral.

Why do these lessons make me uncomfortable?
These lessons make me uncomfortable. I want to deny this reaction because it seems selfish, but I also want to be honest. In meeting these women, I am forced to consider other possibilities for my own life, and I am forced to confront the fact that I don’t want to imagine the proximity between my life and theirs. A cerebral contemplation is given many different faces and I don’t know what to do in response. I don’t know how to avoid making judgements about the quality of their lives that I have no right to make. I don’t know what to do with the fact that the quality of their lives and mine are part of larger social systems that, while being interconnected, seem also impossible to affect. This project makes me uncomfortable because it forces me to sit with the contradictions of my own ideas and priorities.

What happens to this project when presented in a gallery?
Living in 10 Easy Lessons is presented here in the context of a gallery and as a matter of form Duvall’s and Kingstone’s names are attached to the work, not the names of their teachers. This is a larger problem of the art world’s, that social practices attach their caché to artists and not the participants, and Living in 10 Easy Lessons does not escape it. In explaining why the women of Living in 10 Easy Lessons remain unnamed, Kingstone offered the following: “The women were not
named because we [want] to demonstrate that the lessons belong to a community, and not to any particular individual. It is easier to ignore or disqualify when a named subject tells you of something they do to get by. You could easily say, ‘Oh, that was just them’. But with having them unnamed and qualified simply by number turns [their skills] into an instruction...[For instance], if you saw the lessons of how to put on a flotation device on an airplane, it will never say that Judy Smith has given you these lessons. Naming participants has been very important in past projects because they were personal stories...but not for *10 Easy Lessons*.”

In the movement from the circumstances where these skills are actually used, to the classroom environment of *Living in 10 Easy Lessons*, an abstraction takes place: the nuance and strategies behind what makes these skills effective is discussed apart from their implementation as such. In that space of abstraction—from the real world to the art world—these women evince a certain humour and pride at presenting the things they know to a real and imagined audience that cares to listen. In that space of abstraction, there is an agency in representation that these women claim and enact. The intent of this project is not to actually teach these skills, but optimistically, the legitimacy that a gallery presentation confers (which is certainly not the only kind of legitimacy this project engenders) is distributed between Duvall, Kingstone, the women they encountered and a viewer’s experience of the work. But then again, who are we (I am speaking to an art-world audience here) to imagine that we bestow an agency that isn’t there already? Who are we to represent the stories of another in a context that is unrelated to its origins?

This old question of who can speak for whom should not be allowed to shut down conversation, but rather, it should curtail power. Ask questions! Engage in the dialectic! Be aware of what your subject position entails. The ethical obligations at stake when representing stories that are not your own are fraught with negotiation and social strain, but should history be a criteria for participation? Certainly not. How boring and close-minded we would be if we never put ourselves in relation, if we never challenged our reactions, if we did not attempt to transplant our identities into new conditions.

I believe that art offers space of imagination that affords a certain latitude from the constraints, practicalities and logic of the world as it is. It may not be that art has more capacity to produce change than other activities, but it does have the potential to nurture propositions. If the guiding principle of *Living in 10 Easy Lessons* is to make invisible skills visible, then perhaps it is our duty as engaged viewers to unmake the project as art, to contribute in whatever ways to a social paradigm that recognizes the skills represented here as valuable.

At its core, *Living in 10 Easy Lessons* puts on display a set of interactions between the artists and a series of participants. Differences between and amongst them are inevitable. That Duvall and Kingstone chose to work with women who are street-involved means that at least one kind of distance is deeply embedded in the project, but let’s not kid ourselves to think that there is the possibility of ever reducing distance between two people regardless of whether or not they access social services. Indeed, there is as much distance between Duvall and Kingstone as there is between any of the women they worked with, as there is between you and me. The only appropriate response to this distance is to reach across it, and to feel yourself stretch as you do so.

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8 From an email conversation between the artist and the gallery, June 21, 2012.