

Laurel Nakadate

American, born 1975

Some subjects are best approached in a contradictory manner—by identifying their lack. The opposite of love—loneliness, isolation, lack of connection—can etch an outline around the shape of what love might be. Enter Laurel Nakadate, whose entry into the homes of strangers provides the perfect opportunity to consider life without love. Nakadate’s work can be polarizing; it has been both championed and maligned. It also has the effect of sending critics into a tailspin of contradictory claims—often within the same article—and putting us in the position of doing personal inventories, asking ourselves what idiosyncratic buttons she’s pushing that trigger our strong reactions.

Happy Birthday, 2000 [Work 31], is one of Nakadate’s earliest video works, produced when she was a graduate student at Yale. The piece is presented without backstory, a three-channel video in which each screen frames the modest and semi-depressing apartments of middle-aged men, a birthday cake, and the artist. There is no explanation of why Nakadate is there or what her relationship with these men is. At various intervals, each man attempts to “celebrate” Nakadate’s birthday, each one fumbling, awkwardly lighting candles, tentatively singing “Happy Birthday,” eating cake, making sad approximations of light conversation.

What is not explained in the piece—and in many of Nakadate’s videos—is that the men were strangers to the artist, random meetings in parking lots, on elevators, at supermarkets. Nakadate describes a process of being approached by these men, and, counter to what almost any young person is taught from an early age—not to go home with strangers—and no doubt to the tremendous surprise of the men—Nakadate agrees to come to their homes; that is, if they are willing to let her videotape them. This conceptual turn is as fundamental to the work as any other aspect. It demands that we understand these videos as documentaries, despite Nakadate’s insistence on the works as fictions.¹ Indeed, it is here that hackles are often

raised. Is Nakadate exploiting these men, manipulating their essentially innocent flirtations? Or, is she putting herself at risk for her art? Are these men predators? These kinds of questions are complicated further in later works, such as *Lessons 1–10*, 2001, and *Greater New York*, 2005, in which Nakadate escalates the latent sexual tension of her early videos by appearing in skimpy underwear, occasionally topless, and upping the stakes in the kinds of exchanges they enter into, simplistic games that could be read as fetishistic role playing: artist’s model, pretending to be dead, conducting campy fake exorcisms, not to mention the artist’s frequent appearance in a too-tight Girl Scout uniform.

Nakadate is part of a lineage of photographers such as Diane Arbus and Nan Goldin who have taken their cameras to various underworlds and nether-regions and brought back images that both fascinate and disturb us. She also walks in the footsteps of an artist like Cindy Sherman, whose portraits of herself have minimal currency as self-portraits. Perhaps most pointedly, Nakadate’s project shares DNA with Sophie Calle, whose work often engages strangers. There are broader cultural phenomena that ripple through Nakadate’s work, from American Apparel ads to the online culture of oversharing images and videos, a hyper-stylized and often privileged party culture that exists as much to self-document as anything else. Indeed, Nakadate spent extracurricular time in her college years documenting young women from Ivy League colleges in heavy party mode, an experience that seems to have given rise to a particular strain of loneliness, alienation, and perhaps even cynicism that would lead to a logic by which it might make perfect sense to hook up and make art videos with sad, middle-aged dudes who tried to hit on her at the market. Perhaps Nakadate’s theater of acute discomfort is also a meditation on the persistence of a need for love.

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1. She says they are “. . . about 10 percent me and 90 percent fiction.” Scott Indrisek, “*The Believer*—Interview with Laurel Nakadate,” *The Believer*, October 2006, accessed October 20, 2012, http://www.believermag.com/issues/200610/?read=interview_nakadate.



Work 31
Laurel Nakadate
Still from *Happy Birthday*, 2000
three-channel video (color, sound)
4 minutes, 49 seconds