

Candice Breitz: From A to B and Beyond

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If there's a rule of thumb for looking at Candice Breitz's work, it's the rule itself. Every one of her video installations can be reduced to a very simple formula. Take the *Four Duets* series, for example: select four music videos of sentimental love songs from the last half-century. Collect and string together the moments in which each of the four performers sings either "I, me, my" or "you." Display the "I Loop" opposite and in dialogue with the "You Loop" from each song. Discard all remaining footage. Or *Diorama*, 2002: start with the cliffhanger episodes of each of the fourteen seasons of the soap opera *Dallas*. Edit out a string of repetitive sound bites for each of the main characters. Discard all remaining footage. Display in a living room furnished out of local charity shops. Or *Soliloquy Trilogy*, 2000: take blockbuster movies starring three Hollywood icons and, in each case, reduce the entire film to the star's speaking parts only. Discard all remaining footage. Project in small cinema. Or *Becoming*, 2003: begin with seven romantic comedies. Edit each down to the female star's key scene. Discard all remaining footage. Act out the selected scene yourself, as best you can.

A recycler at heart, Breitz scavenges the overwhelming remains of popular visual culture, applies a highly reductive editing process to them and ends up with another – and more primary – set of materials. Like the crushed Coke can, the final product is a mere sliver of its former self: distinct enough to be recognisable and yet so distorted that we balk at the memory of its original form and our pleasure in using it. Yet Breitz's work, however simple in its execution, is far from simplistic. While appearing to subscribe to minimalist strategies, Breitz on the other hand owes much to pop. Her work brings the sparse conceptual idiom of the former to bear on the colourful realm of the latter. From the perspective of art history, her method appears as a unique, if not cacophonous, marriage of Sol LeWitt's formulaic wall-drawings to Warhol's production line of silk-screened Marilyn Monroes, freshly cooing out of the Factory.

Teasing out what these rival aesthetics share with each other, Breitz uses mechanical editing strategies – the mechanisation of culture itself – to probe the subjectivity of both the characters trapped within the screens in that make up her installations, and the viewers who stand before these screens. While the stars are caught in endless loops, the spectators are robbed of the very elements that would allow them to invest in the screen, the special effects and predictable plots that they have come to expect. Of course, it is tempting to try to reconstruct the many missing parts that Breitz withholds, all that discarded footage: Who did shoot J.R.? What was the first line of that Carpenters' song? Is this the part before or after Julia Roberts and Richard Gere go on that fabulous shopping spree on Rodeo Drive? But Breitz's pop cultural abbreviations can also lead to entirely other cultural practices and meanings – as the crushed soft drink can, finally liberated from the taste of Coca Cola, can become a range of other objects in its more simple and reductive form. It may be easy to work out how Breitz's work is made; finding ways to use it proves to be more engaging and challenging.

"Face, My Love"

In 1968, a lone man started to haunt a large train station in Vienna. As the night trains took off to destinations westward and beyond – Munich, Zurich, Paris – the man sat for long stretches of time in a photo booth, hidden behind a flimsy

curtain, endlessly taking pictures of himself. The black-and-white photographic stripes that the machine delivered, still moist with chemicals, bore the traces of what seemed to be a bizarre ritual, perhaps a psychotic episode: a mouth stretched in all directions, eyes turned up to reveal their whites, eyebrows squished tightly together, nostrils flared far too wide, a head and neck contorted into what could only be painful positions. Later, the man scribbled over his curious photographs, making them less recognisable, less human. Despite the misanthropic appearance of the images, the man seemed to be inspired by an entirely humanistic mission. He saw his automat-portraits as a means of excavating “asocial inner structures” from deep within his body. He was hoping that he might be able to transform these once-hidden structures into “social and sellable products.”¹

The man in question was the Austrian artist Arnulf Rainer. The result of his nocturnal visits to the Vienna train station was the series *Face Farces*, 1969-1975. While his self-portraits failed to gain the social currency that Rainer had hoped they might, they did secure an iconographic position within art history as a unique example of an artist's extreme experimentation with the body. Breitz's latest video installation – *Becoming*, 2003 – seems to be situated at the opposite end of the same spectrum, resulting as it does out of similarly intensive labour. Closed up in the confines of a studio in Stockholm,² Breitz spent a long, hot summer trying to capture on film, not the “asocial inner structures” that Rainer had sought, but instead, the most social, the most exterior and, some might argue, the most omnipresent structures of the mass media. Wearing a simple white shirt and using but a few props in the seven short black-and-white films that constitute one half of the *Becoming* installation, Breitz grapples to express not a psychotic, animalistic self, hidden deep within, but a highly-stylised self, pre-packaged in Hollywood and delivered via the silver screen for our immediate consumption. Endless takes – shot in rapid and excruciating succession – were required before Breitz could lip-synch the lines dictated by an already-made set of seven movies (the other half of *Becoming*), while simultaneously body-synching the facial and torso movements of each of the seven actresses appearing in these pre-selected clips (each of the pilfered clips is a concise sample of the romantic comedy *à la* Hollywood). The project required that Breitz mimic, one by one, Cameron Diaz's swinging lower jaw in *The Sweetest Thing* (2002), Drew Barrymore's arching eyebrows in *Wishful Thinking* (1997), Jennifer Lopez's self-effacing sobs in *Angel Eyes* (2001), Julia Roberts's horsy femininity in *Pretty Woman* (1990), Meg Ryan's dizzy shrugs in *You've Got Mail!* (1999), Neve Campbell's high-pitched tantrum in *Three to Tango* (1999) and Reese Witherspoon's blinking disbelief in *Legally Blonde* (2001). Where Rainer had produced a multitude of grimaces, which he later defaced with his own brand of graffiti, Breitz ultimately selected just one *almost* perfect take from the countless takes that she endured in her efforts to match the performance of each leading lady. Instead of hiding her prototypes, Breitz displays the original Hollywood colour footage back-to-back with the black-and-white copycat footage of herself, the two movies thus bound together like Siamese twins, not only by their shared soundtrack but also by their identical duration.

Despite differences in medium and appearance, the experiments of Rainer and Breitz can each be understood as attempts to challenge the natural expressions of the face. Deleuze and Guattari speak of “deterritorialising faciality,” an experimental process of becoming someone or something else as a result of which the face comes to move in uncanny ways.³ For Rainer, this process begins inside. Breitz takes her cue from the outside. Both produce startling self-and-other portraits, black-and-white images of

themselves possessed by a foreign presence, at once strange and familiar (in Breitz's case, even her tongue has been seized by a polyphony of American female voices). But how can we account for these inverse strategies of looking to facial deterritorialisation? Rainer worked at a moment when the spectacle was still in its infancy; he could still treat art as an isolated site of distribution, perhaps with normalising effects. By contrast, Breitz operates in a world where the media has reached its saturation point, with around the clock music videos, reality TV, news, lifestyle magazines and, of course, perpetual commercials. Every would-be alternative gesture that digs deep within, faces imminent recuperation from without, as the fashion and entertainment industries regularly feed upon the ideas of artists, only to regurgitate them as happy meals. If produced today, Rainer's *Face Farces* – once shockingly asocial – might very well inspire a CD cover, a fashion show or an ad for designer mugs. To better understand the generational difference, one need only compare Rainer's desire to socialise and sell his *Face Farces*, with Breitz's view on the prospects for invention within the realm of contemporary art: "It's certainly difficult to reconcile oneself to artistic strategies that have a utopian bent at this moment, given the accelerated pace at which every possible strategy of aesthetic resistance is absorbed, packaged and marketed as product in our current culture. Thomas Crow cannily pointed out years ago, that for more than a century now, artists have been the research and development arm of the fashion and entertainment industries, where their difficult and innovative ideas are repackaged for easy consumption. The question then, is what strategies remain viable at a moment in which narratives of resistance are as utterly available to the mainstream market as fast food."⁴

How does Breitz produce an experience that differs from that served up to us by Hollywood and MTV? And what of aesthetic resistance? Evidently, the artist turns the tables, so that instead (or in spite of) being robbed by the entertainment industry; she appears to take pleasure in shoplifting images from that very industry herself. The new and different forms of experience that result – along with the possibility of developing a sense of creative resistance – belong first and foremost not to Breitz, but to the spectators of her work. The differences begin with the contrast between Breitz and the actresses she mimics (exaggerated by the contrast between the colour footage of the latter and the black-and-white footage of Breitz), but they emerge most viscerally through Breitz's tactic of reductive edits and brutal repetition. On the one hand, by eliminating the interlocutors who once addressed the actresses now cut-and-paste out of various movies, Breitz emphasises the actresses' status as icons: their well-lit faces are powerful enough to shine alone on the screen, she seems to tell us, with this gesture. On the other hand, as she multiplies herself seven times over in the black-and-white copycat films that complete the installation, Breitz starts to look like the master-copy – the original from which all of the other performances derive. The use of black-and-white footage bestows on her gestures the antiquarian feel of an originating source, which might indeed have preceded the colourful Hollywood films. Her neutral clothing (white shirt, black pants) bespeaks the didactic illustrations of an acting textbook. Her empty sets create scenes that seem as if they could have been filmed in any location.

While appropriating the soundtrack of each original clip as her own, and thus sacrificing her voice entirely as she becomes host to the voices of the source actresses, Breitz simultaneously reduces the seven actresses to her own body. As she apes their every motion, their gestures begin to lose their magic, their singularity, their auratic appeal. The initial shock of difference is inverted such that the originals are now easily

mistakable for copies, if not stereotypes. Breitz is a female impersonator here, a drag queen who parodies her muses. But as she holds a mirror up to Hollywood, the artist also reflects our own urge to become the faces on the screen. After recognising the stars who serve as Breitz's templates in *Becoming*, spectators may gradually begin to recognise their own behaviour too (reduced to the idiom of romantic comedy), and perhaps slowly begin to realise that they too, have been robbed of their most precious possessions: expressions, emotions and gestures. Since Breitz herself remains hidden behind a mask all the while, it is impossible to idealise her as an alternative to Cameron Diaz and company. Spectators are left to find their own face.

Monkey See, Monkey Do

In 1933, Walter Benjamin penned a concise theory of languages. "Nature creates similarities," the essay begins, on a deceptively simple note. "One need only think of mimicry. The highest capacity for producing similarities is that of man. His gift of seeing resemblances is nothing other than a rudiment of the powerful compulsion in former times to become and behave like something else."⁵ Benjamin calls this gift "the mimetic faculty" and offers evidence of its existence in everything from children's play to graphology, from astrology to language. As his examples demonstrate, Benjamin understands language in the broadest sense of the term, as a moment when meaning is produced not through signs, but through similarities between unlike things, and by virtue of our ability (indeed our compulsion), to recognise these similarities, to act them out and to act upon them. He moves away from the notion of language as a system of representation grounded in a hierarchical relationship between signifier and signified, between absence and presence, between a fake sign and the real thing in the world that it serves to reference. Under Benjamin's gaze, the world opens itself up as an archive of non-sensuous similarities, which can always be recovered, renewed or accumulated afresh. But he goes on to assert that the mimetic faculty is historical and thus changes over time. One need only look to the child who once played make-believe, before later learning how to write; or observe society itself, which once found its news in the stars, and in the reading of omens and entrails, before finally turning to the daily newspapers.

Flexing their own mimetic muscles, readers might see several similarities between Benjamin's theory of language and Breitz's installation *Becoming*. The artist evidently gives free reign to her own mimetic faculty in this work – and a well-tuned one it is. But I would like to focus here on Benjamin's claim that the mimetic faculty and mimetic objects have a historical dimension. In terms of history, there is a small leap between the child who makes-believe and the adult who writes. A larger leap marks the interval between our ancestors' readings of omens and entrails and our contemporary reading of the daily tabloids. But each of these changes is dwarfed in relation to the radical transformations inflicted on the mimetic faculties of those individuals who take their daily cues from the mass media – a condition that Breitz literalises and performs, as she "becomes" Drew Barrymore or Julia Roberts. Writing before the advent of television, Benjamin spoke of the liberatory effects of film, but he also feared a "far-reaching liquidation," whereby every possible story or narrative would be taken over and mediated by the film industry, at the expense of other more personal instances of mimesis.⁶ The mimetic practices that guaranteed the passage of cultural memory from one generation to another, from the group to the individual, from parents to their

children, would henceforth be taken over by the impersonal and abstract faces glowing on the silver screen.

In a recent interview, Breitz observes that, “It is not particularly pleasant to confront the fact that our pasts are increasingly defined (some would say ‘eroded’ or ‘obscured’) by the cultural products of globalisation (pop songs, Hollywood movies, MTV), but I think it is far more dangerous to simply ignore this fact.”⁷ The artist’s assessment of relatively recent pop culture – and in particular, of the mimetic dimension of pop songs and blockbuster movies – serves as an update on Benjamin’s reflections on the film industry of the last century: “When we think of our lives in historical terms, when we think of ourselves as historical beings, then we think not only of where our grandparents are from or what neighbourhood we grew up in, but also of the first album that we bought, the first concert we attended, the first song that induced us to play air-guitar. We define ourselves by the music that we listen to, by the songs that we first heard at key moments in our lives.” Like Benjamin, Breitz recognises in the world of mass culture, both the potential for a liberatory moment of self-transformation *and* the imminent threat of pre-packaged identity that accompanies each such moment. An opportunity for self-invention can easily end up being one through which the passivity of the self is simply reinforced. The danger, Breitz notes, is that “Rather than truly being offered a moment of self-invention,” we might instead be “invited to shape our selves into moulds which have already been poured.”

Far from lamenting the situation, however, Breitz fully embraces pop culture as the dominant mimetic object. Instead of simply allowing herself to be poured into the mould, she takes the role of an active consumer, transforming and deforming pop cultural products even as she grants them more airtime. Often, the artist’s interventions have the eerie feel of historical documents that chart the rise of pop culture. *Diorama*, 2002, which takes its source footage from fourteen episodes of *Dallas*, is a case in point. Breitz chose this hit television series in particular, because it could be recognised around the world. For her, the visibility that *Dallas* achieved during its prime-time regime is proof of its historical value as an early instance of global consumption. Having collected and looped sound bites from the nine main characters in the series, Breitz encases each of the characters in a separate monitor and positions the nine monitors in a rather banal living-room setting (the living-room is reconfigured each time the work is exhibited in a new city, according to the furniture discarded by the inhabitants of that city, which Breitz excavates from local second-hand shops).⁸ In this diorama of middle-class television-viewing life, the monitors function like glass display cases in a museum of natural history, except that rather than housing desiccated animals, they have been filled with the Ewing clan: Jock, Miss Ellie, J.R., Sue Ellen, Bobby, Pam, Lucy, Cliff Barnes and the whining young Christopher. Robbed of as much *élan vital* as the stuffed birds and animals whose positions they have taken, they are reduced to a post-existence of repetitive mechanical spluttering.

Beyond memorializing the televisual ’70s and ’80s, Breitz’s *Diorama* has an almost Darwinian dimension, precisely because her work is concerned with tracing the shifting uses to which we apply our mimetic faculties. Here is an Ur-history of global consumption, but also of global marketing, the show-casing of a moment when, for the first time, flat television images gave rise to living copies of themselves, copies that multiplied prodigiously around the world, anthropological copies of *bouffant* hairstyles and swollen shoulder-pads, of attitudes, lifestyles and gestures that could trace their earliest incarnations to Southfork Ranch. *Diorama* spookily foresees the arrival of

genetic replication, when more than just hairstyles and shoulder-pads will be pre-packaged and emulated. Walking through the installation, one senses the coming liquidation of nature itself, whereby every organic element, from humans to plants, will be taken over by a powerful new form of mimesis governed by genetic engineering. *Diorama* stands in an anticipatory relationship to this future peopled by genetically engineered clones, in the same way that the bird anticipated the flying machine.

Speaking in Tongues

In 1886, Lejzer Ludwik Zamenhof sat at his desk in Warsaw, then part of Russia. A physician at the start of his career, Zamenhof had been dabbling in languages since high-school – a seemingly natural pastime for someone growing up in an area where Russian, Polish, German, Yiddish and French could regularly be heard. But the polyglot, who had also picked up Latin and Greek, had decided to reject all of these existing languages in order to invent an entirely new language – a language free from history, nation-states, politics, class, religions, territories, ethnicities, accents, and the battles that these weights on words seemed to engender without end. Dr. Zamenhof was working on a language that could be learned four times more rapidly than any other tongue, a language that would eliminate the old hierarchy between native and foreign speakers. With only sixteen grammatical rules (no exceptions!), phonetic spelling and a building-block vocabulary, he hoped that the neutral language might eventually overcome all linguistic barriers and facilitate communication across cultures, not to mention improved and easier international relations. The following year, Zamenhof managed to publish *International Language: Foreword and Complete Textbook*, a guide to the words that came from nowhere and thus could be spoken anywhere, by anyone. Zamenhof, perhaps in an attempt to erase his own origins, signed his masterpiece with the pseudonym “Doktoro Esperanto” – the doctor who hopes.⁹

Although Esperanto is still spoken around the world today, Zamenhof’s hopes for a broad international tongue were far from realised. His artificial language, with approximately two million dispersed speakers, remains something of a linguistic curiosity. It certainly never gained the currency enjoyed by today’s popular culture, nor as many followers as the brands of global consumerism, from *Gap* to *Adidas*, from *IKEA* to *Nokia*, from *Sony* to *Vogue*. “There is a dark possibility that insatiable consumerism may be the only *lingua franca* that is available to us at this point,” says Breitz. “As global capital extends its borders, it might be said that the culture that it supports and sponsors is the closest thing that we have to an Esperanto.”¹⁰ Many would note that globalisation speaks English and thus bespeaks the American colonisation of the cultural imaginary. I would add that English has become so popular in our times because its words have increasingly been accompanied by moving pictures – a fact that Breitz acknowledges by taking moving images as her raw material, indeed as her vocabulary.

When Guy Debord described the “Society of the Spectacle” in 1967, he was referring not only to the abundance of images that populated the urban landscape that he saw before him, but also – and more importantly – to the spectacle’s propensity to mediate *all* social relations.¹¹ If there’s no picture, there’s no story, precisely because the story needs the image in order to propel itself across borders, cultures and languages. The spectacle appears to have appropriated the goals that Doktoro Esperanto set for his

project. Although the images that constitute the spectacle come from somewhere, they are entirely portable and can be seen anywhere, by anyone. Like Esperanto, the spectacle is not just a form of communication, but also a mode of belonging, one that transcends nationality, race, class and religion. In the words of Warhol, quoted in an interview by Breitz: “A Coke is a Coke and no amount of money can get you a better Coke than the one the bum on the corner is drinking.”¹² Of course, Coca-Cola is more than just a drink that everyone can afford to buy. Coke is a visual compound including a logo, a slogan (“Always, *Sempre, Toujours*”), a mutating but always-recognisable red-and-white uniform, and an endless range of images and associations bred by decades of advertising (from her early years in South Africa, Breitz remembers the jingle “Coke is Life” as one of the most audacious examples of this advertising). Indeed, all success stories like that of Coke are triumphs of the spectacle in miniature, easily spread, highly visible, and evoking a sense of belonging without ever uttering a word. The music video – a medium that Breitz visits time and time again in her work – turns songs into images that can be seen the world over; one can worry about understanding the words later, if at all. Of course, the single most important visualisation of the spoken and written word in the last century has taken place on celluloid. Hollywood films have not only produced memorable scenes, but have also condensed millennia of human events into mere slivers of space and time, the history of the world bought to you in ninety-odd minutes: tales, epics, events, intrigues, mysteries, romances, thrillers, comedies, biographies. Finally, it is possible to fight a large-scale battle without ever shedding a drop of blood! For a relatively young country such as the United States, film has proven to be the most efficient – and mnemonic – way of producing history. In a few short years, the American film industry has managed not only to surpass the unwieldy and violent legacy of European history, but also to produce a global system of belonging under the umbrella of the spectacle, be it subtitled or not. Ultimately, the spectacle – whether broadcast in the form of a movie or a logo – speaks the “no place” of utopia that first emerged in a rudimentary form on Dr. Zamenhof’s desk. If only the good doctor had thought to add pictures and a catchy tune to his words, there might have been more hope for Esperanto.

Breitz – who grew up in Apartheid South Africa, where linguistic barriers exacerbated racial barriers – knows all too well how language differences can become divisive, oppressive, bellicose, deadly.¹³ Not surprisingly, in her artistic practice, the artist has given much thought to the kind of lowest common denominator that was at the heart of Zamenhof’s project: “Many key members of the twentieth-century avant-garde were preoccupied with the possibility of a universal language that might communicate above and beyond the specificity of linguistic and national differences,” says Breitz. “The quest for ground zero is as evident in the reduction of visual language by artists such as Mondrian or Rodchenko, as it is in the sound and language experiments of artists ranging from Marinetti to Khlebnikov. I wanted to make a work that would pay homage to such endeavours while at the same time recognising the extent to which any notion of pure language has become increasingly hard to maintain.”¹⁴ The result was the *Babel Series*, 1999; a boisterous installation that found Breitz reducing music videos to repetitive loops of the most primal units of language. Taking over from the language instructor, if not from parents themselves, Madonna sings “Pa, Pa, Pa” while Freddie Mercury opts for “Ma, Ma, Ma.” In another corner, Sting whimpers “Da, Da, Da.” The seven-monitor installation, which is incredibly loud, seems to reflect Breitz’s ambiguous attitude towards pop. The work is immediately intelligible, beyond the wildest dreams of the twentieth-century avant-garde that the artist has obviously studied so closely, and

yet at the same time deafeningly cacophonous, silencing everything that exists around it.¹⁵

Two smaller installations by Breitz, *Double Karen (Close To You)*, 1970/2000 and *Double Olivia (Hopelessly Devoted To You)*, 1977/2000, both from the series *Four Duets*, offer yet another spin on language. In Breitz's brutally abridged version of a pre-historical music video, Karen Carpenter sings "Me, Me, Me, Me," on a monitor placed on one side of a passage-like room, across from a second Karen Carpenter whose overlapping reply is "You, You, You...." The two loops of footage are both extracted from the same television performance of *Close To You* (1970). Following the same logic, Breitz butchers Olivia Newton-John's crooning performance of *Hopelessly Devoted To You*; this time from a scene out of the movie *Grease* (1978). On one screen, Olivia shrieks "I, Me, I, My, I," while from a second monitor placed on the opposite side of the room, she is answered continuously by herself: "You, You, You...." The installations strongly evoke the indexicality of language: the fact that "I" can become "you," while simultaneously demarcating two or more distinct individuals, is what makes complex communication possible (otherwise, we would be reduced to prefacing every verb with a proper name). As they sing somewhat autistically, and quite literally to themselves, Karen and Olivia play the roles of both an "I" and a "you," and in so doing, collapse the possibility of a dialogue. In each case, the spectator is not only caught between the two facing monitors but also held captive in a room that is drenched in a colour that seems to seep out from the background of the respective televisions. *Double Karen* holds court in a room that is overwhelmingly yellow, while *Double Olivia* presides over a space that is olive-green. Even as these rooms masquerade the neutrality of the monochrome, their walls form a stage that stretches from the television screens into the physical space of the spectator, imposing a monotone setting – and image – that cannot be easily escaped.

The *Soliloquy Trilogy*, a series of three short films made by Breitz in 2000, seems to underscore the visualisation of the word once again. In each of the three films, Breitz reduces a Hollywood blockbuster to nothing more than the star's speaking parts: Clint Eastwood's mumblings in *Dirty Harry* (1971) amount to six minutes, fifty-seven seconds; Jack Nicholson's vocal performance in *The Witches of Eastwick* (1987) clocks in at fourteen minutes, six seconds; while Sharon Stone's spoken lines in *Basic Instinct* (1992) last a mere seven minutes, eleven seconds. It is tempting to chide these mega-stars for having worked so little, but their paltry speaking parts are surely an indicator of the extreme extent to which their words – as well as the entire plots of the movies in which they appear – have been irreversibly fused with the moving pictures that transport them to us. Movie-viewers, it turns out, spend an average of about ten minutes actually listening to the characters on the screen, while the remaining duration of the movie is dedicated to watching. But watching is not for free, just as the logo, despite its openness, must often be purchased. Herein lies a major distinction between words that are printed on a page and words that are communicated in the service of the spectacle. The printed word, in most cases, can be quoted to a generous extent, time and time again, with no charge incurred. By contrast, the quoting of an image – a photograph, a scene from a film, an excerpt from a television programme, a sequence from a music video – always requires permission, and is virtually always only possible for a steep fee. As such, Breitz's interventions, which are executed without permission, lie precariously on the edge of legality. Her work not only manifests the ominous transfer of our cultural imaginary into photographs and onto film, video and television, but also underscores our inability to freely access the resultant images for our own

pleasure and use. The universal language of the spectacle, while commonly lauded for its accessibility, in fact comes at a hefty price. Transfixed to the screen, we have born witness as our own history has transformed us into passive consumers.

“Passionate Attitudes”

On a Tuesday in Paris in 1886, a small crowd gathered in the amphitheatre of the Salpêtrière, the hospital where Princess Diana would expire many, many years later. *Le tout Paris* – medical professionals and laymen alike – had come for the *leçons de mardi*. Doctor Jean-Martin Charcot, who occupied Europe’s first chair of neurology at the hospital, walked in with his entourage of assistants, greeted his audience perfunctorily and began to hypnotise his patient, Blanche Wittmann. To the astonishment of the auditorium, Wittmann proceeded to collapse in a fit of *grande hystérie*. Dr. Charcot, holding the woman draped over one arm, remained indifferent to her body and continued to gesture with his free arm to his auditors while expounding upon the lethargic, cataleptic and somnambulistic states. These and other passionate attitudes had, over a period of time, been carefully documented in black-and-white photographs of the doctor’s predominantly female patients. Looking through this archive, one might come across a woman sticking out her tongue to the left at the chime of a tuning fork; a passionate beauty praying to an unseen saint (or perhaps a devil); another woman undulating in fits on a chair. The images, often organised chronologically to capture the flow of the patient’s movements, at the same time slyly anticipate the motion picture, which would be invented in the coming decade by the Lumière brothers. The young Sigmund Freud, who had just completed an internship with Dr. Charcot, would go on to refute many of his master’s findings, in favour of his own “talking cure.”¹⁶

Breitz’s approach seems to straddle those of Charcot and Freud, lying as it does between the body and the psyche, between visuality and aurality, between watching and listening. While her patient is pop culture – and not the hysteric – the repetitive looping dimension of her installations has the disarming effect of hypnosis, the very method that Charcot passed on to Freud, who then used it, with his colleague Josef Breuer, to cure hysteria. Freud and Breuer discovered that if the hysteric, once hypnotised, could recall the traumatic event and relive the emotions behind her curious symptom, then the symptom would disappear. The origin of the symptom was hidden not in the ailing body – as Charcot liked to claim – but in the unconscious. “Hysterics,” they concluded, “suffer mainly from reminiscences.” Yet, by the time their collaborative *Studies on Hysteria* were published in 1895, Freud had already abandoned hypnosis for the free association of psychoanalysis. Instead of hypnotising patients, Freud would analyse their memories, dreams, casual remarks and slips of the tongue, in order to gain access to the unconscious. Breitz’s aesthetic seems to capture all the tensions of this remarkable passage from Charcot to Freud, from examining the body to sounding the unconscious, from the repetition of symptoms to the recollection of their origin – a passage that hypnosis made possible even as it in the same stroke condemned itself to swift extinction. Like the great neurologist Charcot, Breitz hypnotises the footage-bound patients that she kidnaps from pop culture, inducing in them fits of *grande hystérie*. Under her spell, these flickering hostages appear to be suddenly afflicted by incurably repetitive symptoms. Watching Sue Ellen Ewing as she manically and endlessly raises her eyebrows, Miss Ellie as her head nods incessantly up and down, or Cliff Barnes as he rolls his eyes to the heavens, it is easy to make the mental leap from Breitz’s

Diorama to Charcot's beauties, sticking out their tongues, praying and undulating. But like Freud – the neurologist turned psychoanalyst via hypnosis – Breitz's work tunes in carefully to the words that tumble from the mouths of pop culture, the words that ground and define each of the characters that she takes on: "Marry me, marry me" (the good son Bobby Ewing), "I don't want a drunk for a wife" (the bad son J.R. Ewing), "But what about love?" (Bobby's angelic wife Pam), "My house, my barbecue!" (the patriarch, Jock Ewing).

When Breitz turns her attention, with the *Becoming* installation, to a series of elaborate case studies of contemporary femininity, she again echoes her illustrious predecessors, whose studies of hysteria focused almost exclusively on women patients. Rather than examining the hysteric, Breitz's subject is the leading lady of romantic comedy. Wearing Charcot's white coat, Breitz selects and edits her Hollywood clips, zooming in on a host of passionate attitudes, cinematic performances that once looped, gain both the repetitive and the iconographic quality of physical symptoms, from Cameron Diaz's swinging lower jaw to Reese Witherspoon's blinking blue eyes. While the aetiology is clear – Hollywood – the manifestations of the illness change with every case visually documented by Breitz. Drew Barrymore fills up the entire screen with her classically cinematic features, her eyes and eyebrows driving the plot along with the sharpness of a whip cracked on an idle horse's backside. Barrymore displays all the symptoms of *rapid flora optics*, whereby she is prone, without warning, to blink her eyes open just a little too wide, like a blooming flower filmed in time-lapse. Reese Witherspoon manages to insert a full blink of the eyes between the two syllables of "War-ner" (the name of her soon-to-be ex-boyfriend), as her pert shoulder-shrugs mark states of both happiness and despair. Meg Ryan, suffering from a common cold (as if to make things worse), exhibits *hyper-excitation of the limbs*, punctuating her sentences with arms that flop up and down violently. Jennifer Lopez's tears are tainted by the phantom taste of something sour. Neve Campbell suffers from *aggravated high-pitched barking syndrome*, while Cameron Diaz must endure a bad case of the *over-extended lips*, complicated by a *rocking-horse neck and jaw*. For her part, Julia Roberts is a victim of the *eternally wandering gaze*, her eyes moving distractedly from one point to another, settling rarely and then only briefly upon those of her interlocutor.

But Breitz moves beyond the repetitive physical symptoms first made visible and then exaggerated by her hypnotic editing process. Donning Freud's coat, she removes the leading ladies from their movies and liberates them from their scripts, to deliver a highly concise and brilliant analysis of their roles. Just as Freud collected fragments from the meanderings of freely associating minds to make his interpretations, Breitz culls about a minute of footage from a much longer narrative to create each of the seven *Becoming* scripts. Here, there is no access to the unconscious of the actresses; rather, the clipped scenes betray a collective unconscious, descriptive and generative, and very much open to interpretation. Cut away from their respective movies, these fragments begin to tell a very different story. The ability of the romantic comedy to feign feminism while perpetuating sexism is now starkly visible. In these diluted versions of Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew*, the female characters are tough, yet ultimately, we come to learn, their toughness will be worn down by a man. The real tension, in every case, lies in the struggle that the heroine must wage for her autonomy, as she strives for the *ultimate* relationship (as if the former and the latter were mutually exclusive). Thus, Cameron Diaz's character denounces a self-help book on how to find true love as "relationship propaganda," only to refer to dating as a ritual of "self-preservation" in the very next breath, as if the life of a single woman were a survival camp whose hardships could be

ended only by Mr. Right. Playing a streetwalker, Julia Roberts claims to be able to have sex “like a robot” when turning tricks, only to make an exception, in the next instant, for her current client. Insisting on the sanctity of getting “personal,” Meg Ryan’s character nevertheless falls in love with a man she has never met. Neve Campbell’s character is openly aggressive, yet she directs her anger at a gay man, who is currently unavailable, but who will ultimately – as we know all along – reveal himself to be straight. Drew Barrymore’s character also gets nasty, but her vengeance is aimed, predictably, at another woman, who dares to reject monogamy to cheat on the man who Drew’s character secretly loves. Heard with Breitz’s finely tuned ear, each of the characters in turn parodies the limitations of Hollywood-style romance, only to eventually embrace and reinforce its restrictive rules. As she mercilessly mimics her “patients,” Breitz indeed goes way beyond aetiology. Her analysis reveals a silver screen that is infected with a contagion of the most epidemic dimensions.

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¹ The description and quotes are from Arnulf Rainer, “Face Farces” (1971), reprinted in *Arnulf Rainer. Face Farces 1969-1975* (Mönchengladbach: Städtisches Museum Abteiberg Mönchengladbach, 1984), n.p. Author’s translation.

² *Becoming* was produced while Breitz was a guest of the International Artists’ Studio Program in Sweden (IASPIS) during Summer, 2003.

³ Cf. Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari, “Année Zéro – Visagéité,” *Mille Plateaux* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1980), chapter 7. The title of this section of the essay – “Visage mon amour” – is also borrowed from Deleuze and Guattari.

⁴ Hunt, David. ‘Candice Breitz: Fighting Words,’ *Flash Art* (No. 211: March - April, 2000) pp. 84-86. Wolfgang Tillmans expresses a similar attitude: “The industry’s insatiable hunger for clichés, trends and fashion always changes every individual style into a new and welcome marketing strategy. In my own way, I attempt to draw attention to the diversity of personality and identity.” “Gespräch mit Wolfgang Tillmans,” *Wolfgang Tillmans* (Frankfurt am Main: Portikus, 1995), n.p. Author’s translation.

⁵ Walter Benjamin, “On the Mimetic Faculty,” *Reflections*, trans. by Edmund Jephcott (New York: Schocken Books, 1986), 333-336. All references to Benjamin in this paragraph can be traced to this short essay.

⁶ One reads Benjamin’s ambiguity in the following phrases, from which the quote has been taken: “[Film’s] social significance, particularly in its most positive form, is inconceivable without its destructive, cathartic aspect, that is, the liquidation of the traditional value of the cultural heritage. This phenomenon is most palpable in the great historical films. It extends to ever-new positions. In 1927, [the French film maker] Abel Gance exclaimed enthusiastically: ‘Shakespeare, Rembrandt, Beethoven will make films... all legends, all mythologies and all myths, all founders of religion, and the very religions... await their exposed resurrection, and the heroes crowd each other at the gate.’ Presumably, without intending it, he issued an invitation to a far-reaching liquidation.” Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” *Illuminations*, trans. by Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), p. 221-222. The predictions of Gance – who brought Napoleon’s life to the screen in 1927 – came true; Shakespeare’s plays and the bard himself (in love) have been filmed along with Rembrandt (1936, 1942, 1999) and Beethoven (1992), not to mention *Jesus Christ Super Star* (1973).

⁷ This and all quotes in this paragraph are from the English transcript of an interview with Candice Breitz, conducted by Raimar Stange. The final version was published in German in Stange, Raimar. *Zurück in die Kunst*. (Hamburg: Rogner & Bernhard bei Zweitausendeins, 2003) pp. 70-80.

⁸ Thus far, Breitz has created the following versions of the work: *Diorama* (San Antonio), *Diorama* (London), *Diorama* (Miami) and *Diorama* (Dubrovnik). Though the setting changes, like so many living

rooms scattered around the television-viewing world, the loops played back on the monitors remain consistent in each version.

⁹ The book was published in Russian in 1887, under the title "*Doktoro Esperanto. Lingvo internacia. Antaŭparolo kaj plena lernolibro*" (Dr. Hopeful. International Language. Foreword And Complete Textbook).

¹⁰ Altstatt, Rosanne. 'Killing Me Softly... An Interview with Candice Breitz,' *Kunst-Bulletin* (June, 2001) pp. 30-37. The interview, which took place in English, was published in German; the quotes are taken from the original English transcript.

¹¹ Guy Debord's *La société du spectacle* was first published in 1967 by Editions Buchet-Chastel, Paris.

¹² Breitz quotes Warhol in an interview published in: Stange, Raimar. *Zurück in die Kunst*. (Hamburg: Rogner & Bernhard bei Zweitausendeins, 2003). The quote is originally from Andy Warhol, "Work," *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol. From A to B and Back Again* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1975), p. 101.

¹³ The following quote comes from the artist's notes for an unpublished interview, which were shared with the writer: "The South African government did an excellent job of ensuring that South African citizens were divided linguistically. Though all South Africans were expected to speak Afrikaans (leading to violent school riots in 1976), the government had absolutely no interest in encouraging the white minority to learn the [nine indigenous] languages of the black majority, and actively discouraged black South Africans from learning too much English, not only because this might have done damage to the 'divide and conquer' principle central to Apartheid, but also because the government feared that English-speaking black South Africans might try to rise above the low social station that was perceived appropriate to them" (March, 2003).

¹⁴ Altstatt, Rosanne. 'Killing Me Softly... An Interview with Candice Breitz,' *Kunst-Bulletin* (June, 2001). The interview, which took place in English, was published in German. All quotes in this paragraph are taken from the original English transcript.

¹⁵ *Karaoke*, 2000, an installation that followed hot on the heels of the *Babel Series*, and *Alien (Ten Songs from Beyond)*, 2002, explicitly cite the latest global force in language acquisition: Karaoke, that curious hybrid of the music video, the live broadcast and the movie subtitle.

¹⁶ The description of Charcot's "Tuesday lesson" is taken from an undated lithography - *Présentation en 1886 d'un cas de "grande hystérie"* - by A. Lurat, who based his work on A. Brouillet's painting *Une leçon clinique à la Salpêtrière*, also undated. The description of the photographs of the patients is taken from Georges Didi-Huberman, *Invention de l'hystérie: Charcot et l'iconographie photographique de la Salpêtrière* (Paris: Macula, 1982).