



IN THE AGE OF THE MULTIPLE, HOW DO WE HOLD ON TO SPECIFICITY? ARTIST CANDICE BREITZ ASKS THE QUESTION, AND CONTEMPLATES OTHERS ON FEMINISM, IDENTITY AND SUBJECTIVITY.

## A HUMAN TEXTURE: THE VIDEO PORTRAITS OF CANDICE BREITZ

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Candice Breitz draws us into the devotional world of fandom and pop music by recruiting twenty-five ardent John Lennon fans to re-perform, a cappella style, his entire first solo album, *John Lennon/Plastic Ono Band* (1970). The participating fans revisit Lennon's doleful lyrics, penned while he was undergoing primal therapy with Dr Arthur Janov to probe the trauma of his childhood. Breitz configured *Working Class Hero (A Portrait of John Lennon)*, 2006, as a single row of luminous screens that envelop the viewer in surround sound amplified through the soaring, vaulted ceiling of Anna Schwartz Gallery in Sydney.<sup>1</sup> Some participants are reticent while others sing emotively. Breitz's collective video portraits suggest the congregational dimension of incantation, while returning us to songs as the soundtrack of our experiences.<sup>2</sup>

**Natalie King: How did you become an artist in South Africa?**

Candice Breitz: I graduated from art school in Johannesburg in 1993, at the moment that South Africa was shaking off its pariah status and slowly starting to engage the world. Though the isolation of the country at that time made it seem particularly delusional to study art, the context encouraged strong thinking. The fact that none of us expected to be able to sell our work or be represented by a gallery meant that the focus was really on ideas.

I left South Africa shortly after that first degree to pursue graduate studies abroad, first in Chicago and then later at Columbia University in New York, with Rosalind Krauss and Benjamin Buchloh as my mentors. I eventually abandoned the PhD just as I was approaching the last chapter, in favour of working full-time as an artist. So I only really started to think of myself as a fully-fledged artist sometime after leaving South Africa.

**NK: What was the subject of your PhD?**

CB: My topic was post-1968 Warhol, abstract Warhol: the Warhol of the *Shadows*, 1978–79, *Rorschachs*, 1984, *Camouflages*, 1986, and *Piss Paintings*, 1977–78.

**NK: Was Warhol a formative influence in terms of his cult status, his interest in cinema and the way he used repetition and seriality?**

CB: Definitely. After Warhol, it is impossible to think about subjectivity, and how it might be represented, in the same way. Warhol effectively destroys portraiture in the sense that it had existed before his arrival on the scene.

**NK: What about Warhol's *Screen Tests*, 1964–66, which are like filmic portraits?**

CB: The *Screen Tests* are a great example of Warhol's radical reappraisal of portraiture as a genre. My own interest has been in moving the focus away from Warhol's service to celebrity, and in focusing instead on the people on the other side of the equation – the audience, the fans, the subscribers. In 2006 there was a face-off between these two sides of the same coin when the Kunstmuseum St. Gallen installed my *Queen (A Portrait of Madonna)*, 2005, which features thirty Madonna fans, directly opposite *Thirty Are Better Than One*, 1963, one of Warhol's gridded Marilyn portraits.<sup>3</sup>

**NK: You have been preoccupied with fans and those who are invisible. Let's discuss *Ghost Series*, 1994–96, and the two-dimensional montaged and partly obliterated female figures.**

CB: Looking back on *Ghost Series*, perhaps what connects it with my more recent work is an ongoing grappling with the absence that is endemic to portraiture. Portraits absent their subjects, rewrite their subjects, and ultimately they survive their subjects.

*Ghost Series* was made directly after the historic elections that took place in South Africa in April 1994. I used Tipp-Ex to alter ten tourist postcards depicting 'exotic' African women. The flattening layer of white-out applied to the postcards polemically reproduces the violence and erasure that black South Africa had for so long endured under the white nationalist regime, leaving behind a series of ghostly figures whose spectral absence, at the time that the series was made, testified to the ongoing and haunting consequences of apartheid.

**NK: In *Becoming*, 2003, you probe Hollywood clichés of femininity. What is your stance on gender politics and feminism?**









ABOVE  
*Factum Kang*, 2009  
 From the series 'Factum' (2010)  
 Dual-channel installation, 69 mins 10 secs duration  
 Commissioned by The Power Plant, Toronto;  
 commissioning partner, Partners in Art

PAGE 192  
*Mother*, 2005  
 Stills from six-channel installation, 13 mins 15 secs duration

PAGE 193  
*Father*, 2005  
 Stills from six-channel installation, 11 mins duration

CB: I am an ardent feminist! *Becoming* is an attempt to come to terms with the vast distance that separates the airbrushed femininity served up by mainstream entertainment from the actual experience of being a woman. Without the benefit of makeup, alluring costumes or props, and without the help of slick post-production, I try on seven Hollywood actresses, attempting to inhabit their gestures and expressions by re-enacting their performances as precisely as possible. The resulting footage is awkward, and hopefully revealing of the very limited range of options available for the representation of women within the media.

NK: It's a unique experience casting yourself in your own work. Are you interested in Cindy Sherman and the performative self?

CB: Many artists have explored the performativity of selfhood, often in more nuanced ways than Sherman, but she was nevertheless a key figure in this regard. Being a self involves an endless series of performances, performances that are often responsive to the particular contexts in which they take place. We really become ourselves in the space between ourselves and others, which is why I find the term 'inter-subjectivity' more useful than 'subjectivity' when it comes to thinking about how a series of performances of the self coagulate into a particular identity.

NK: If subjectivity is mediated by the encounter and relationships, let's discuss *Mother + Father*, 2005, which is the quintessential Oedipal relationship. You have said that making *Mother + Father* was like a decade of therapy compressed into one year.

CB: Our relationship with our parents is of course very primal, formative in the most epic sense. That said, given the fact that we are increasingly parented by the culture industry (which much of the time also means being infantilised by that industry), *Mother and Father* are attempts to imagine and confront the media forces that have become like parents to us. More and more we learn who we are – our personal vocabulary of words, gestures and expressions – not only from our parents and our immediate social contexts, but also from the culture industry. In that sense, the media has gradually come to share, and in certain instances to take over, the complex job of raising us. *Mother + Father* is my stab at thinking about that conundrum.

NK: If *Mother + Father* looks at the parental relationship, then you have siblings or twins in *Factum*, 2010, named after Robert Rauschenberg's quasi-identical combine paintings of 1957. What were you trying to uncover about that very particular sibling relationship?

CB: I'd say I was primarily interested in exploring the internal and external forces that drive individuation. Each work is a fictional conversation between a pair of identical twins, fictional in the sense that the siblings were interviewed separately, their responses then woven together later in the editing process. While the initial interview allowed each person to tell his or her own story unencumbered, each double portrait in the series introduces the other twin as a fictive interlocutor who offers a subtly or radically different perspective. This interplay between a documentary approach and the fictionalising force of the edit is ultimately about creating a space in which to think about the inter-subjective dynamics via which people become themselves, a ping-pong process that is not exclusive to twins.

NK: I am interested in that process of becoming in relation to place and your work currently on display at Anna Schwartz Gallery in Sydney, *Working Class Hero (A Portrait of John Lennon)*.

CB: *Working Class Hero* belongs to a larger series of works, each of which zooms in on a particular community of fans in a particular part of the world, inviting the individuals in that imagined community to re-perform an album in its entirety. I'm interested in thinking about the extent to which it might be possible to hold on to individuality in

the light of the plethora of homogenising forces that we increasingly encounter. Each portrait frames a relatively limited space within which fans are invited to interpret and translate an album that in a sense functions as the script for the installation. To what extent are we obliged to follow the scripts written for us by the circumstances that we enter into or are defined by in our daily lives? And to what extent is improvisation and creativity possible? In other words, to what extent can we deviate from the script? The structure of *Working Class Hero* and the other works in this series opens on to these questions, I hope.

NK: Place is embedded in many of your works. You recruited Lennon fans and set up parameters like Sol LeWitt's *Instructions, 1971* – like rules.

CB: What has always fascinated me about Sol LeWitt is the rigour and precision with which his works are articulated, and yet the manner in which they become interpretive at a certain point – the play between what is fixed and what is left open.

NK: *Working Class Hero (A Portrait of John Lennon)* has a strong congregational, symphonic quality with a cappella sound. How important is the sonic dimension?

CB: There's something deeply profound about hearing a large number of voices sounding together: the sonic texture of community. The choir is always to some extent about the play between an individual and a larger constellation. Single voices are important, but only in their relationship to the whole.

NK: Lennon's lyrics are mournful and consider issues of class and place.

CB: The lyrics are visceral, the songs somewhat raw. Lennon sings about the death of his mother, abandonment by his father, a deep-seated sense of isolation. I find the album very moving. The lyrics continue to speak to me very strongly.

NK: What are you listening to in Sydney?

CB: Right now I'm listening to Lana Del Rey, Vampire Weekend and late Neil Diamond.

1 *Working Class Hero (A Portrait of John Lennon)*, 2006, was on show at Anna Schwartz Gallery, Sydney, 27 July – 28 September 2013.  
 2 This interview took place in Sydney on 26 July 2013.  
 3 'Lifestyle' (2006) was exhibited at the Kunstmuseum St. Gallen, Switzerland.