

INTERVIEW WITH CANDICE BREITZ

January 2007

The exhibition *Candice Breitz: Multiple Exposure* will be opening in the MUSAC on 20 January, and running until 2 May 2007. It brings together works by the South-African artist Candice Breitz dating from the year 2000 down to 2005. MUSAC interviewed Ms. Breitz to find out the key features of her exhibition from her own point of view.

MUSAC: The star system of the cinema and music industry, video clips and the language of the media... What role do these play in your work?

CB: I don't think it is necessarily possible to escape the spectacular terrain that is mapped by such forms. But I do think it is possible to inhabit the spectacle that they constitute in such a way that the logic at the heart of this spectacle can be teased into visibility, made more legible. When something becomes legible, then it also becomes translatable, penetrable and thus available for rewriting. The spectacle is ominous to some extent because it presents itself as our natural landscape. We get so accustomed to existing within it that we forget that it might be possible to map alternate landscapes. This viewpoint may come across as naively optimistic, but the alternative is to accept the spectacle as inevitable and insurmountable. To resign ourselves to complete helplessness in the face of the spectacle would be to admit that our practice as artists, writers, musicians, is simply futile and beyond the point. I'm not ready to accept that conclusion. If I work with a Madonna music video or a film like *Basic Instinct* or a soap opera like *Dallas*, it's because this is in fact the food that we eat every day. Either we can digest it and absorb it into our systems passively or we can actively chew it, process it, and regurgitate it in forms that reflect more acutely on the context out of which such a culture stems. What interests me about working with 'Lowest Common Denominator' material like this, is that there is an instant point of entry and accessibility at the level of iconography, and yet, formally, an estrangement from the material as the narrative continuity and linear predictability that one associates with such material is removed in the final work.

MUSAC: Why do you set anonymous people off against big stars in your videos? Does this come from your concern with 'identity', one of the driving forces in your work?

CB: The contrast between the found footage works, and the works in which I give almost free reign to amateur performers, points to a central dichotomy in my work, a dichotomy between the "somebodies" (stars whose visibility is their claim to power) and the "nobodies" (fans and consumers of global pop culture, whose identifications and obsessions largely remain invisible). My own allegiance lies with the nobodies, amongst whom I count myself as a user of the culture. Therefore, when I am working with fans, I like to keep my directorial presence very light, creating an environment in which they can perform their relationship to the entertainment industry in whatever way they choose. Interestingly, few fans want to emulate their idols in the studio. They prefer to translate the material into their own terms. When I make works like *King* or *Queen*, I'm effectively surveying a community of

consumers who are in dialogue with the music of a particular pop star, and testing the range of identifications that one pop star can generate. The diversity is extraordinary.

MUSAC: A characteristic of your work is the reorganisation and decontextualisation of commercial film material through the “montage” (cutting, pasting, re-editing...), this is a constant feature, as well as a defining element in your work. Is there a critical intention behind that approach?

CB: Any artist who appropriates and samples existing material in her work draws on a long avant-garde tradition. Perhaps in the past it was possible to imagine this way of working as a deliberately chosen artistic strategy, one aesthetic option among others. The fundamental difference now would appear to be that using found or readymade material in one's work no longer seems like an option – rather, at this point, it is an inescapable condition. This need not be a depressing reality: it is less about the loss of the idea of 'originality' than it is about the realization that the creative process is not about originating and animating, but rather about recycling, translating, interpreting, in short, a process of reanimating materials and languages that pre-exist one's own practice as an artist. One has no choice – if one lives in a large urban center – but to consume the cultural produce of global capitalism. But consumption must be followed by digestion, and digestion must be followed by excretion.

To accept this condition and work from within it, is on the one hand to give up on the worn cliché of the rugged individual artist who exists outside of everyday social realities (untarnished by the values of the world beyond his studio), and on the other hand to embrace a more politicized practice which operates from within the arena of social reality, a practice which takes on and remixes the existing world. As a visual artist, there is no point in imagining an escape from the nondescript cultural landscape that has been mapped for us by Hollywood, MTV and CNN. Rather, it is necessary to invade the operating system that designed that landscape – to inject oneself into the mainstream media as a viral presence. We have no choice – if we live in large urban centres – but to consume the cultural produce of global capitalism. But consumption must be followed by digestion, and digestion must be followed by excretion. This is a polite way of saying that if we have no choice but to consume what the mass media feeds us, then we must insist on completing the digestive cycle – we must insist on the right to chew up, process and regurgitate mass media forms such that they might service us rather than merely milking us.

MUSAC: Where does your interest in language come from?

CB: English is the language in which I am most 'at home.' During my years in South Africa, I also had strong ties to Afrikaans, Yiddish, and Greek (though I have absolutely no Greek blood, I pretty much grew up within the Greek emigrant community of Johannesburg). I must admit that I did not realize, until much later, how strange the condition of language was in South Africa. Beyond these European languages, which textured daily interactions for me, there were another 9 indigenous South African languages to which I had no access at all. One of many disturbing aspects of the Apartheid years in South Africa was the fact that one's movement in public space and relation to public experience were determined not only spatially but also linguistically. Access to park benches and public bathrooms, for example, was strictly delimited according to skin-color. But perhaps even more insidiously, the 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 the violent school riots in 1976), the government had absolutely no interest in encouraging the white minority to learn the 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' principal 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 to be appropriate to them.

Can you imagine the absurdity of growing up in a place where you can't speak the languages that are spoken by the majority of your compatriots? On the few occasions that one did find oneself in a public space where one might feasibly interact with black South Africans (walking

down a street, in a park), there was always this invisible barrier that discouraged any kind of real communication, that is, one simply couldn't understand what was being said around one in Zulu or Xhosa or Pedi, etc. As a child, I became accustomed to thinking of language as something opaque and somehow violent, the thing that kept people apart, rather than a transparent bridge across which one might negotiate difference. I think that this intuition feeds into works that I made many years later, such as the *Babel Series*, *Karaoke*, and *Alien*, all video-installations which in some way evoke language as a quantity which is only semi-permeable and definitely complicates rather than simplifying human relationships. That said, I did not realize, until I had been working with dissonant sound compositions in the video installations for quite some time, that the forms of discordant and opaque language that are to be found in my work, might somehow be informed by my first and earliest experiences of language.

There is irony in the fact that this moment in time is marked by so much talk about global communication and connectivity, since one might argue that the possibility of communicating across difference has become increasingly difficult as the hype about transparent communication networks has accelerated (with the arrival of the internet and other such structures). I have always been fascinated by the possibility of a *lingua franca*, a common language that one might use to communicate across difference... and yet it is of course no easy task to discover such a language. Reluctantly, I think one could say that our common habits of consumption are at this point the only semblance of a trans-cultural shared experience that we have, the fact that, as global consumers, we buy and assimilate the same cultural products no matter where we are in the world. Working with global media iconography means working with something of a degraded *lingua franca*, the lowest common denominator material that is the culture of global capitalism. This is a culture that people all over the world share, a system of reference that is the matrix of our times. The assumption that we all have equal access to a certain standard of living and system of values is perpetuated by the global iconography that I tend to recycle in my work. I am interested in entering and interrogating the simulacral democracy of consumerism. I am interested in challenging bogus assumptions about our equality under global capital by somehow interpreting and translating the over-familiar matrix of consumer culture into something new through which the violent homogenizing effect of such culture can be challenged.

MUSAC: Why did your attention shift to the moving image?

CB: The ideas I was exploring in my photo-based work tended to be linguistic and performative in nature. There was often an implied duration built into them. It was a logical step to start experimenting with moving images. The dimension of sound attracted me. I was also interested in the mechanical and repetitive potential of video, as this relates to certain psychological impulses. The drama of being is a drama of repetition. To maintain a notion of who we are requires a certain consistency, the constant repeating and confirming of certain beliefs, values and behaviors. We learn who we are by watching others. We learn to speak in the same way, through mimicry and repetition. We get to know ourselves through our recurring desires. The video loop is a great way to explore this whole drama.

MUSAC: We have asked you a lot about video work, yet we should also mention the various ways in which that medium materialises in your work (monitors, metal structures, etc.). What weight do those particular features carry in the conception of your work?

CB: I tend to think of the making of a video installation as an act of translation, as I have already mentioned, and on the other, as an act of composition. I suppose these activities – translating and composing – are the central strategies of the dj, which is why certain writers have compared my editing style to dj-ing. Each channel or element is treated as an instrument or a layer, which when combined, produce a kind of random composition. The compositions are random because I am not interested in controlling or strictly determining the relationship of one channel to the next. Rather, I am interested in presenting them as a series of possibilities, which the viewer can then negotiate in whatever form s/he prefers. The final remix then, is given over to the viewer, who choreographs the work in a sense, according to how s/he moves through the space of the installation and experiences each channel relative

to all of the others within the space. Of course I have the prerogative of deciding which elements and what kinds of elements are thrown into the mix, but then in the end the viewer is invited to navigate through the selected elements independently to some extent.

MUSAC: Mother + Father, a very successful piece in 51st Biennale of Venice and recently acquired by MUSAC Collection, will be one of the central piece of your exhibition in León and pointed out by the curator, Octavio Zaya, as “maybe” your masterpiece until moment. Could you explain what takes place in this doble installation?

CB: Given the fact that we are increasingly parented by the culture industry (which much of the time also means being infantilized by that industry), *Mother* and *Father* are attempts to imagine and confront the media forces that have become like parents to us. For each of these six-channel installations (each is presented on an arched semi-circle of six large plasma displays), I've literally chopped six actors out of their respective movies, isolating them from their previous contexts so that they could act for me in a new script that I have created. *Mother*, for example, brings together six actresses playing the role of mother – from Shirley Maclaine's alcoholic diva-mother in *Postcards from the Edge* to Meryl Streep's child-deserting mother in *Kramer vs. Kramer* – and relocates them in a non-linear and often absurd series of dialogues and scenes that are dripping with 'motherness.' The basic structure of *Father* is the same – six actors get yanked out of six father-esque movies, to perform their 'fatherness' alongside each other... under my direction.

I wanted to see to what extent it might be possible to divorce my sampled *Mothers* and *Fathers* from their original movies – to what extent I could truly make them mine. I've always been fascinated by how completely a sample can be absorbed by hip-hop, or other cannibalistic forms of music. It seems to me that musicians are a lot further along than visual artists in this respect. Though you may recognize the fact that Missy Elliot is sampling the *Knightrider* theme tune, this in no way inhibits your enjoyment of the resulting song as pure Missy Elliot. *Mother + Father* is an aggressive attempt to hack a cast of actors out of several existing movies, an attempt to re-channel labor originally invested in the economy of Hollywood into my alternative economy. The actors have been quite literally cut out of their movies, freed from their original settings frame-by-excruciating-frame. I refer to their participation in my work as 'involuntary acting.' I like to believe that as somebody who buys movie tickets, reads magazines, and watches television, I am a minor but significant shareholder in the *Meryl Streep Corporation* or in *Julia Roberts International*. As an economic supporter of this culture, I (and you) contribute to the inflation of labor that makes Hollywood what it is. Having paid my fair share towards perpetuating this swollen industry, I feel perfectly entitled to step in and get the actors to work for me every now and again. That said, grabbing the strings and playing puppet-master is not as simple as it may sound. As the sampled actors perform for me, their digital twitches and jerks can be read as symptomatic of their dilemma as hostages, reluctantly dancing to a tune they have not chosen. Although I set out to kidnap the actors and get them to do my bidding as completely as possible, I would say that in the end, the whole experience of making the work felt less like working with marionettes than like a vicious tug of war between my involuntary cast and me. This was an interesting result because it confirms my suspicion that in the end meaning always resides somewhere between the sample and the sampler, rather than simply belonging to one or the other.

The parent-child relationship maps itself quite neatly onto the star-fan relationship. The star/parent offers itself to the fan/child as a prototype to be emulated and duplicated, not only in terms of appearance and behaviour but also in terms of values. If the media is competing to be a parent to our children, then what does this media-mom and media-dad look like?

In the *Babel Series*, the parent-child dynamic that I associate with the fan's adoration of the star, was inverted, as various pop stars looped through endless monosyllables of baby talk. In *Diorama*, a whole spectrum of family experience was collapsed into a primal chant about marriage and love and divorce and adoption. With *Mother + Father*, I wanted to explore the purely affective dimension of Hollywood tearjerkers--the breaking-point emotions associated with parenthood: rejection, devotion, desperation and obsession. I wanted to release the affect from linear narrative, to see if I could free the actors from the original movies and get

them to act for *me*. Most Hollywood movies depict parents as dysfunctional, unhappy or incompetent, almost as if, in order to claim the parental role for itself, Hollywood must undermine the credibility of real parenthood.

MUSAC: If *Mother + Father* is about the parent–child relationship, then *Queen*, also included in the exhibition, is about the star-fan relationship. How it functions in this portrait of Madonna?

CB: When I decided that I wanted to make a series of portraits, I knew that I wasn't interested in a monographic or monumentalizing type of portraiture. Avoiding an overtly iconic representation of the pop star is a way to suggest that the star is, on some level, a mirror in which the collective desires and fantasies of her fans are reflected, rather than some kind of fixed, unchanging entity. Madonna and Michael Jackson are therefore portrayed in their absence, as composites of the elaborate projections of the fans who buy their albums, who hero-worship them, and who made them stars in the first place. The first portrait was a portrait of Bob Marley, which I shot in Jamaica and titled *Legend*. After that, I decided to tackle the King and Queen of Pop. We filmed the portrait of Jacko in Berlin, and the portrait of Madge in Milan a week later. A series of hardcore Madonna and Michael Jackson fans were each invited into a professional recording studio and given the opportunity to individually perform the entire *Immaculate Collection* or *Thriller* albums, from the first song through to the last. I wanted to replicate the experience that you have at home when you listen to an album that you love and sing your way through it, albeit under professional recording conditions. Other than this, I made no attempt to direct the fans – they chose what they wanted to wear, if they wanted to bring props, and how they wanted to interpret the album. Some sang and danced like there was no tomorrow. Others shyly fought their way through the experience.

We advertised on fan websites, in magazines and newspapers, and on notice boards in public places, always making a simple call for serious fans of the relevant star. Those who responded were fully informed about the project, and were asked to write to us in detail to tell us why they should be a part of it. The responses were amazing. When I work with fans, those who fall outside of the spotlight and who are subject to the forces of publicity and marketing, my approach tends to be much softer. I don't see these people as victims, but they are certainly subject to very powerful forces that can shape their fantasies and influence their personal formation. I'm interested in the biographical dimension of pop, the way that it can become the soundtrack to a life. A pop song can trigger very personal memories, prompting you to remember the first time your heart was broken, or where you were when you last heard the song.

In works like this I realized that it would be impossible for me to make my work in isolation. The working process is always collaborative for me, literally and otherwise: both because I rely on other people to help me make my work, and because my work more often than not emerges in conversation. An idea never really seems like an idea before I've discussed it with several friends. Godard would say, "You can't come up with all the answers by yourself. You often have to say things out loud. And just as you say it, when you hear yourself say it, you come up with the answer..." Warhol would say, "I was never embarrassed about asking someone, literally, 'What should I paint?' because Pop comes from outside, and how is asking for ideas any different from looking for them in a magazine?" I agree with both of them, though they might not agree with each other! Ultimately I think that the intention of a Godard or a Warhol is less interesting than the way that we receive what it is that they're saying, the way in which we interpret and digest the signals that they transmit. In general, an artist's idea is usually quite boring until it is activated by the viewer in the moment of reception. And so the viewer is always somehow the most important collaborator that the artist has. The moment of reception is more interesting than the moment of creation, in the same way that talking to somebody else is usually more interesting than talking to oneself.