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Notes on Video Portraiture

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ACTUALITÉS/DÉBATS

NOTES ON VIDEO PORTRAITURE

In the late 70's, Jean-Luc Godard and Anne-Marie Miéville made an extraordinary series (in twelve "movements") for French television called *France tour détour deux enfants*. It was essentially a portrait of two school-aged French children, Camille and Arnaud, but its moral, existential and philosophical reach extended out to the very borders of the French state and beyond. The work mapped the institutional contexts (family, school, media) of the boy and girl while exploring the phenomenological conundrums of lived experience. Made for and about television, it was emphatically a work of engaged, socially inflected video art. Godard and Miéville's central methodology consisted of merciless interviews with the children. Unseen, but heard from behind the camera, Godard would ask baffling, brilliant and sometimes comically inappropriate questions such as "is your image in the mirror real?" or "when you hear the school bell, do you go to the school or does the school comes to you?" The responses were sometimes pained and inarticulate, but the probing questions resonated powerfully throughout the series as the imbrication of the outer and inner worlds was insistently made manifest.

The children, although in some discomfort, were treated as truly sentient beings. Actual adults in the series, were repeatedly referred to as monsters. "Les monstres" was a euphemism for all those guilty of consumer conformity, for anyone scrambling for the security of consensus. Freeze frame, superimposed texts and slow motion figured prominently in the programs, in what seemed like an attempt to visualize the unconscious of daily life. A simple gesture, a wandering gaze, getting dressed in the morning, running in the school yard, all this was given a startling new clarity. The overall effect was a mournful lyricism spliced with analytical commentary – at once seductive and distancing – which imparted vast amounts of new, difficult and previously unknowable social and psychic knowledge. For its speculative force, ethical stance, radical formal play and aggressive institutional critique, this work has been a paragon of portraiture in video for me.

A potentially vast array of video portraiture is currently possible when one considers the ubiquity of video equipment and attendant explosion of digital media combined with the elastic definition of the portrait. One of video's earliest impulses was of course a form

of self-portraiture, where the operative metaphor was the mirror (think of Lisa Steele, Colin Campbell, Peter Campus, Vito Acconci, Bruce Nauman and Joan Jonas). Indeed, Rosalind Krauss famously theorized that video was engaged in an aesthetics of narcissism, positing a distinction between the reflexiveness of modernism and the "mirror reflection of absolute feedback"[1] she noted in much video of the 70's. Many different strands of video production emerged however, that also looked outward and to the "other," including experimental narrative, oppositional media critiques, and documentary forms. More recently, artists as diverse as Gillian Wearing, Richard Billingham, Donigan Cumming and Rineke Dijkstra have produced extraordinary video portraits combining both documentary and aesthetic strategies. But I just want to consider a few cases of portraiture here, while staying clear of observational modes of documentary practice. I want to focus on a few experimental videotapes, which have displaced the definition of what constitutes a portrait. Let me state at the outset that my working definition of the portrait straddles both reality and fiction, it is both a document and a staging.

A veil of suspicion seems to have fallen over all representations in this digital age, as questions of manipulation, authenticity and truth abound and multiply. Ideas of what constitutes the real have always been in flux. Media art is a central force in questioning the ever-shifting status of reality. Can we ever again, if indeed we ever were, be satisfied that an image is an accurate representation ? What does *accurate* mean ? Portraiture in particular, which is engaged with representations of the other, is never really a straightforward proposition : any cursory examination yields endless debate, subtext and covert agendas. The parameters of subject and object do seem blurred. Is the objective world, which we encounter in our experience and thought, something that exists on its own or is it dependent on our subjectivity ?

Also of interest here is the very fraught notion of identity itself, which has been elaborated as a discursive field : an unfolding of narrative (albeit also propelled by primal drives), defined by a multitude of alliances and intersections of social, biological, political, technological, and representational vectors.

The Dead Weight of a Quarrel Hangs (1996), by Walid Raad, is an experimental portrait of the Lebanese civil wars which devastated the artist's homeland from 1975 to 1991. It takes the form of short, "fake" documentaries. The video articulates fundamental questions about representing such an uncontainable

and incoherent phenomenon as war. This fictionalizing complicates, and some might argue, trivializes the reality of this tragic historical event (or series of events), yet it is precisely what gives this conceptual and cerebral video such bite. Proceeding by underlining what is normally discarded in war, a kind of anti-master narrative, the tape catalogues imaginary events, insignificant diary entries, small domestic objects gathered and taken into exile. All the vignettes address someone's attempt to record a history no one else is attempting to document, let alone acknowledge. In a radical questioning of the authority of the archive, Walid Raad's tape considers war (and portraiture) as an abstraction. In a section called *Secrets in the Open Sea*, sheets of blue photographic film are found and then sent off to be processed in a lab, only to reveal group shots of dozens of militia leaders who all perished at sea. The tape builds masterfully to a stunning, if muted, climax in which a security officer who is assigned to spy on political conversations along Beirut's famous boardwalk, La Corniche, repeatedly and touchingly moves his video camera to frame the setting sun instead. The surveillance tapes are duly confiscated, but a few minutes survive "unedited." A poignant litany ensues as hundreds of disembodied shadowy figures strobe in silent fast-forward across the screen, while the still blazing sun sinks repeatedly into the sea.

As the title suggests, Neil Goldberg's short tape *My Parents Read Dreams I've Had About Them* (1998) features the artist's elderly parents, Shirley and Elliott Goldberg, reading from sheets of paper their son hands to them from behind the camera. The parents are framed frontally, and unblinkingly, and appear as somewhat befuddled and impassive participants in their son's artistic antics. Not an exploitative scenario, but a rather tender and affectionate one. The tape offers a comical triangle of kinship and connection via the son's gently absurd and always revealing dreams. The parents obviously believe in their son's work, although they may not fully understand (nor should they necessarily) the conceptual dimension of what they are doing. With only a hint of suppressed amusement, the very funny dreams are read in a deadpan matter-of-factness without any trace of emotion, culminating in the father reading :
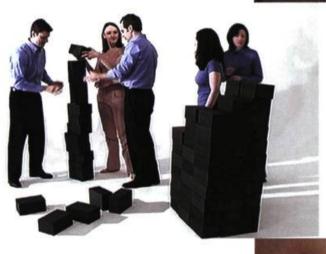
"We're driving – but there's something wrong with the car, so we have to drive in reverse. We're on the Long Island expressway and it's hard driving backwards..." at which point the mother, who until then had shown exemplary control, cannot manage to suppress laughter for the rest of the tape. We have no

way of knowing whether the dreams are real or not, as they range wildly – as dreams do – from encounters with "midgets" at a movie theatre to pool parties at his parent's house on Long Island (without a pool), "where towels and brushing of teeth feature prominently." In this latter dream, read by the mother, the artist spots an attractive young man: "don't know if gay or straight." Flirting and trying to sound smart, he tells the man about an idea for a video project he has where a tiny camera would be attached to the end of a long thin cable, only to be met with indifference and a dismissive "it's already been done."

Known for her dangerous, borderline-unethical invasions of privacy and conceptual enactments of loss, Sophie Calle, (here collaborating with Gregory Shephard), has conceived a dialectical form of video portraiture in a video titled *Double Blind* (1992). Using the familiar shot/counter shot of classical cinema, Calle and Shephard embark on a voyage, each equipped with a camcorder pointed at one another, and each producing a radically different version of their real-life voyage/relationship. From New York to San Francisco in an old and ailing Cadillac: "cross-country but at cross purposes."[2] It is a sorrowful and pitiful video diary, much of it told in still shots, as in a photo-roman indebted to Chris Marker. The fascinating results are both a send up and re-inscription of gender stereotypes and cultural expectations. The video moves deftly as a continuous monologue and conversation in a strange landscape dotted with roadside weirdoes and artists (among them, Bruce Nauman). A desperate, almost embarrassing attempt to gain physical intimacy and commitment pervades Calle's account. Her whispered or voice-over comments (the more "truthful," interior counterpoint to actual conversations in the video) attest to utter, if humorous, dissatisfaction. This finds a perfect encapsulation in repeated shots of empty motel beds over which she laments: "no sex last night." He, on the other hand, seems to have his own agenda, ostensibly worries about his car, possibly another woman, but accepts to be finally married in a Las Vegas drive-through chapel. The quest for a normative union is thwarted repeatedly by suspicion and errant longing. Intimacy, voyeurism, desire, all figure powerfully in this 75-minutes road-movie which was a montage of dozens of hours of material. This compression has the inevitable effect of altering and necessarily fictionalizing the lovers' account. Hanging out in Shephard's apartment prior to embarking on their voyage, Calle finds a note where Shephard had listed his resolutions. He writes among other things: "no lying."

Bill Viola's *The Greeting*, shown at the 1995 Venice Biennale, marked a turning point for the artist. The single screen projection stages a muffled, yet fiercely dramatic encounter, in extreme slow motion, between two women talking and a third pregnant woman who rushes into the scene. The women wear contemporary brightly colored flowing dresses, but they are set against an oddly historical Italianate cityscape. A high-speed 35mm film camera is used to record this 40-seconds encounter. But when slowed down to an excruciating 10 minutes, every permutation of emotion seems to be meticulously recorded by the camera. A complex social moment is thus made epically and triumphantly visible on screen. Based on Pontormo's painting of 1528 *The Visitation*, Viola's work visualises an ambiguous psychosocial situation where two women are talking and are interrupted by a third who proceeds to whisper ominously and indecipherably in the ear of one of them. The social dynamics change, the other woman is initially excluded, but then introduced, and we are able to see this portrayed in all its human grandeur and ambivalence. Indeed, we see "the invisible world of all the details of people's personal lives – their desires, conflicts, motivations – that is hidden from our view and creates the intricate and seemingly infinite web of shifting relations that meets the eye."[3] A number of video group portraits were produced following this work, inspired by a residency on "The Representations of the Passions" at the Getty Research Institute where the artist devoted himself to studying the depiction of extremes of emotion. The *Quintet of the Astonished* (2000) evolved through many single figure "studies" but eventually brought together five actors in a slowly moving group video portrait expressing different emotions, in various configurations and colors of feeling, ranging from rage to rapture.

Alix Pearlstein's two channel video installation *Episode* 2002 compresses the dynamics of family life to a ten-minutes wordless choreography which achieves, through acute observation, a rendering of the subtleties and complexities of human interaction. It is decidedly a symbolic portrait of a nuclear family, with all the integral components (father, mother, son and daughter) fixed in gender and generational conflicts. A series of amusing scenarios around sibling rivalry, mimicry, competition, power and other typically familial issues are doubled, with very slight variations, on two opposing screen projections. The four barefooted actors are tossed about in infinite white space, their minimalist clothing set off as forceful blocks of color, their raggedy doll-like movements in coun-

Alix Pearlstein, *Episode*, 2002-2004. Video.

Bill Viola, *The Greetings*, 1995. Video installation.

Walid Raad, *The Dead weight of a Quarrel Hangs*, 1996-1999. Video.

terpoint to the camera which is itself a hyper-kinetic participant in the proceedings. Pearlstein's use of sound is crudely masterful: whispers, crowd noises, percussive fragments, all in richly ironic relation to the images and actions.

Portraiture's long and complex history of depiction and its function as a legitimation of power or rank are gently re-imagined in a recent work by Sam Taylor-Wood. *David* is an intimate video portrait, shot in a single long take, of one of the world's great footballers, David Beckham. Now on display at London's National Portrait Gallery, it shows the great sportsman as he lies asleep, (a nod to Warhol's first film, *Sleep*) after training in Madrid, in a gorgeous Caravaggio gloom. Celebrity, of course, can activate even the state of sleep. It can elevate abandon, lassitude or, in this case, sports induced exhaustion to officially sanctioned triumphs. The portrait may be glamorous and reverential but it is also a quiet, horizontal displacement (debasement) of the subject's implicit heroism, and of portraiture's vertically hierarchical formulations.

Some of the works mentioned above would not necessarily be designated as portraits by their makers, but I have found it productive to think about them in that way. The debates around representation in media or time based arts concerning abstraction, narrative and identitarian or political activism seem even more urgent and vital when applied to the portrait – an unavoidable and enduring genre mutating into many moving objectifications of our experiences of the world.

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NOTES

[1] Rosalind Krauss " Video : The Aesthetics of Narcissism ", *October* (Spring 1976).
[2] Robert Beck, " Paranoia by the dashboard light : Sophie Calle's and Gregory Shephard's Double Blind ", *Parkett* # 36 (1993).
[3] John Walsh quoting Bill Viola, John Walsh et al., "Emotions in Extreme Time : Bill Viola's Passions Project ", in *Bill Viola : The Passions*, Los Angeles : Getty Trust Publications, 2003.