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# *Process and Meaning in the Art of Candice Breitz*

**Marcella Beccaria**

Among the moments that defined her later production as an artist, Candice Breitz recalls her gradual encounter with various forms of popular culture. As the artist remembers, the notoriously censorious South African government had only allowed televisions to enter South African homes in 1976, delaying this moment for as long as possible for fear that information acquired through television-viewing might lead to a less manipulable South Africa.[1] "This delay alone lent an exciting appeal to television when it finally made its arrival in South African homes in the late seventies. However, the potential for accessing alternative information through the new medium was not to be realized just yet. The government-run SABC (South African Broadcasting Corporation) made it clear from Day One that all programs transmitted by the single-channel television station were to be carefully monitored and approved by government officials. It was a few years more before the video-machine appeared alongside the television in our home. In opposition to the State sanctioned broadcasting of the SABC, which offered its viewers no choice or challenge, here was a medium that not only promised a much greater diversity of viewing, but which also seemed to invite response and intervention."[2] Breitz evokes the thrill of having the opportunity, for the first time, to record a chosen image, to fast forward the boring moments, to rewind and re-watch favorite scenes, or to pause footage at a particularly fascinating moment. Her early encounters with the medium of video were to be fundamental to her later artistic practice, having inspired in her not only a love of experimentation but also a spirit of creative resistance.

While it is impossible to reduce an artist's development to a few biographical moments, Breitz's memories of her South African childhood tell us something of the interior workings of an artist who constantly resists the temptation to produce biographical works. In her work, she tends to play down personal experience, preferring instead to think of herself as a symptom of her times. Born in Johannesburg in 1972, Breitz belongs to the last generation of South Africans who lived through the Apartheid dictatorship, a regime that achieved its ends by means of division and disinformation. The South African government actively encouraged linguistic misunderstanding between different racial and ethnic groups.[3] Breitz recalls the sense of alienation that she experienced in relation to the broad array of languages that could be heard outside her home, the majority of which were

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[1] Until 1982, the SABC (South African Broadcasting Corporation) broadcast only one channel, exclusively in English and Afrikaans. After this date, a second channel was introduced, featuring programs in the native South African languages.

[2] The biographical details are from a conversation between the author and the artist (Berlin, December 2004). Unless otherwise indicated, all quotes from Candice Breitz are taken from the same conversation.

[3] The Apartheid regime was installed by the Afrikaner centric National Party, after elections held in 1948. It remained in force until 1990. Nelson Mandela was freed from prison on February 11, 1990. South Africa's first democratic elections were finally held on April 27, 1994.

completely opaque to a white South African child.[4] Interestingly, explorations of the confrontational nature of speech and language have been prominent in her work, echoing the artist's early Babel-like environment. Leaning away from an overly subjective use of language, Breitz tends to ground her work in a language that might be construed as common, again and again adopting as her raw material what she refers to as "lowest common denominator forms" such as postcards, popular magazines, music videos, soap operas, and Hollywood blockbusters. Breitz describes the language of the mass media as a somewhat perverse *lingua franca,* a shared zone of experience that is on the one hand oppressive (flattening local cultures and dialects as it spreads across the globe at a viral pace), but is on the other hand rich in potential, given the huge number of people who are fluent in this common tongue.

The artist's deliberate decision to use found material in her work, as well as the early development of her characteristic way of working, are evident in early works such as the photographic series *Ghost Series* (1994 - 1996), *Rainbow Series* (1996), and *Rorschach Series* (1997). It is here that Breitz first declares her intention to use the strategy of appropriation and to choose a somewhat removed objectivity over a romantic rhetoric of personal expression. In the *Ghost Series,* her starting point is a series of postcards of black women in tribal dress, images that are staged for the eye of those who buy them - white tourists mainly. Using white-out,[5] Breitz reduces the women to spectral silhouettes, shrouding them in whiteness such that only their eyes, mouths, and noses remain visible. The ethnographic backdrop of each ghostly portrait is left intact, confronting the viewer with the problematic notion of noble savagery that is inherent to such images. As the uncanny *Ghosts* pose and smile before the photographic apparatus, we are taunted by the cancellation of their subjectivity. In their ordinary circulation, these postcards already function as screens for the projection of the exoticist mastering gaze. Breitz's intervention confirms that such images in fact betray much more about the desires and values of those who make and buy them than they could ever tell us about the subjectivity of those who pose for them.

The artist extends her analysis of the commodification of the female body and the codes governing the commercial distribution of images in her *Rainbow Series.* Working with the same *National Geographic-style* postcards that she used for the *Ghost Series,* Breitz splices these together with a series of fragments gleaned from pornographic magazines. The resulting collages are of improbable and monstrous bodies. Hand-cut with a surgeon's scalpel, the *Rainbow* images are stilted and mechanical, awkward juxtaposition of a mixture of limbs of different colors and proportions. No attempt is made to restore an organic unity to the bodies. As opposed to the idea of a coherent and harmonic whole, the series evokes the scarring that accompanies the formation of a hybrid identity, responding in particular to the trauma of nation-building in post-Apartheid South Africa, a country

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[4] The artist's memories of her homeland are bound up with an education system designed to exclude any possibility of contact between different ethnic groups South African schools were divided ethnically and racially and made no attempt to educate school children about the diversity of languages and cultures in their country. It was not deemed necessary for white children to learn an indigenous language despite the fact that Zulu and Xhosa speakers vastly outnumbered first-language English and Afrikaans speakers in the country. Likewise, black school children were not encouraged to learn English, as this might afford them too much upward mobility. In addition to English and Afrikaans, nine indigenous African languages finally became official in post-Apartheid South Africa: Zulu, Xhosa, Swazi, Ndebele, Southern Sotho, Northern Sotho, Tsonga, Tswana, and Venda.

[5] White-out deletion fluid is also commonly known by the brandname "Tippex."

in which identity could not have been more fragmented at the time that this series was made.[6] At the same time, the works resonate in relation to broader debates about multiculturalism, hinting that a degree of fragmentation and alienation may in fact be endemic to all processes of identity formation.

With her *Rorschach Series,* Breitz undertakes an even deeper analysis of the body as a platform for political debate. Once again making use of appropriated pornographic imagery, the *Rorschach Series* highlights the passive and abject nature of images constructed by an eye that seeks to be in control. Earlier examples of the use of photomontage to explore the notion of the fragmentation of the body can be found in the work of artists such as Hannah Höch, Claude Cahun, Louise Bourgeois, and Carol Rama.[7] Like these artists, Breitz chooses the simplest and most low-tech of strategies. To make the *Rorschach Series,* she cut a series of pornographic fragments from their sources, then duplicated and mirrored these using a photocopying machine before Scotch-taping the original fragment next to its mirror image along an imaginary central fold. The resulting photographs recall Doctor Rorschach's symmetrical inkblots, which he famously used in the early twentieth century to analyze the unconscious workings of his patients' minds.[8] Rorschach claimed that the blots stimulated patients to reveal their innermost desires and fantasies, an objective that is caricatured by Breitz in her use of deliberately exaggerated anatomical fragments. The estrangement and illegibility of the human body in Breitz's *Rorschachs* nevertheless suggests that she takes seriously the central claim of Rorschach's research, for her works likewise seem to insist that the production of meaning can only occur with the active participation of the viewer. The work of art is cast as a mirror waiting to reflect the dialectical response of the viewer, or perhaps more precisely as the opening gambit of a conversation. From the *Rorschach Series* onwards, the activation of the viewer's response through an open structure becomes fundamental to Breitz's poetic vocabulary. Her photographic work anticipates developments in the video installations that would soon follow, pushing the viewer to participate in the logic of creative deconstruction and reconstruction that is central to her practice.

In Breitz's work, the creative process is defined as a process of selection and translation. Her artistic strategies reflect the "cut-and-paste" logic that has spread so dramatically with the increasing availability of digital technology, a logic that we now find everywhere - in film, video, music, photography, and fiction. The meaning of her work is intimately linked with the formal strategies that she chooses. Accordingly, conceptual decisions are detectable in her work as easily visible formal traces, whether in the white-out that cracks on the surface of the *Ghost Series* or the undisguised Scotch tape that holds together the *Rorschach Series.* White-out fluid, scissors, and Scotch tape are working tools that we might expect to find on an editor's desk, and it is no accident that Breitz frequently refers to her work as the work of an editor. As well as connecting her to her

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[6] The title of this series of photographs makes direct reference to the term "Rainbow Nation," which was first coined by Nelson Mandela in his inaugural speech in Pretoria on May 10, 7994, in a bid to imagine a newly hybrid post-Apartheid identity for South Africans.

[7] For an analysis of the work of these artists and their use of photography, drawing, and watercolor, see C. de Zegher, "Introduction: Inside the Visible," in Idem (ed.), *Inside the Visible. An Elliptical Traverse of Twentieth Century Art* (Cambridge, MA-London: The Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston-The Kanaal Art Foundation, Kortrjik, The MIT Press, 1996 ), pp. 19-41.

[8] Hermann Rorschach (Zurich 1884 - Herisau 1922) began experimenting with the use of inkblots in 1911 and intensified his systematic research in 1918 after he was appointed director of a clinic at Herisau in eastern Switzerland. In 1921, Rorschach expounded his theories in an essay entitled "Psychodiagnostics." His inkblots also inspired Andy Warhol's *Rorschach* paintings (1984).

contemporaries, Breitz's use of "cut-and-paste" also harks back to the twentieth-century avant -garde, to those artists who used collage and montage not only to open up the picture plane and let in the chaos of everyday life but also to challenge the hierarchy of "high" and "low" culture. As we learn in our first lessons in the history of modern art, the invention of collage occurred parallel to the introduction of language - as fragmented letters and words onto the surface of the canvas. The revolution began with Braque's cubist works, immediately followed by those of Picasso. In the same period, Ferdinand de Saussure was developing his Structural Linguistics.[9] Picasso's best known work of this kind is *Ma Jolie (Woman with a Guitar),* painted between 1911 and 1912. The written words used in this innovative manner found their way from behind the doors of a music hall, a fashionable form of popular entertainment in Paris at the time, of which Picasso was a fan. Apart from being a reference to his lover at that time, the words *Ma Jolie* came from the refrain of a popular song, a tune that would certainly have been familiar to Picasso's contemporaries[10]. Almost a century later, pop music, despite its built - in obsolescence, is increasingly a part of the rhythm of our daily lives. As Breitz comments: "When we think of our lives in historical terms, then we think not only of where our grand parents are from, or what neighborhood we grew up in, but also of the first album that we bought, the first concert we attended, the first song that inspired 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 past lives. Pop seems to offer opportunities for self-invention - this is what makes it so seductive."[11]

In her *Babel Series,* Breitz constructs a complex visual and audio landscape. Seven monitors are suspended in space at different heights. They relay short clips of footage displaying a range of iconic pop stars (Madonna, The Police, Prince, Freddie Mercury, Grace Jones, Wham, and Abba). Each clip is an excerpt from a well-known music video, isolated and reduced to a short and monosyllabic audio-visual fragment. The singers are trapped within their frenzied loops, like scratched records condemned to continuous repetition. As in subsequent video installations by Breitz, the high volume of the *Babel Series* is deliberately uncomfortable. The aura of seduction associated with pop - the familiarity of the pop stars' faces and their innocuously memorable hit songs - is translated here into an intolerable pandemonium, a violent assault on the senses.[12] Like the Sirens' song in the story of Ulysses, our fascination with the songs - and the iconic singers who sing them - conceals the serious threat of the destruction of individual identity. Evoking the influence of the entertainment industry on our daily lives, the impact of Breitz's work is intensified by the linguistic constraints that she imposes on the hijacked pop stars. They are reduced to the eternal utterance of primal grunts, their language stripped of its ability to communicate. As the artist

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[9] *Cours de linguistique générale* was first published by Editions Payot, Lausanne-Paris in 1916.

[10] The song was entitled "Dernière chanson," performed for the first time at the famous Alhambra music hall in Paris in 1911. As he quotes the words of the refrain ("O Manon, ma jolie, mon cœur te dit bonjour"), Picasso is referring to Marcelle Humbert. See J.S. Weiss, "Picasso Collage and the Music Hall" and R. Rosemblum, "Cubism as pop Art," in K. Varnedoe, A. Gopnik (eds.), *Modern Art and Popular Culture. Readings in High and Low* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art-Henry N. Abrams Publishers, 1990), pp. 82-115; 116-132.

[11] Candice Breitz interviewed by Raimar Stange, in R. Stange, *Zurück in die Kunst* (Hamburg: Roger & Bernard bei Zweitausendeins, 2003).

[12] In his essay "Four Installations," Christopher Phillips eloquently describes the effect that the *Babel Series* had on visitors when it was first shown in public at the Istanbul Biennial in 1999, under the vaulted ceilings of the Byzantine Hagia Eireni Church: "Echoing non-stop off the building's centuries-old brick walls, the voices merged into a frenzied chant, causing some visitors to flee with their hands clapped over their ears." C. Phillips, "Four Installations: Candice Breitz," in M. Sturm, R. Plöchl (eds.), *Candice Breitz. Cuttings* (Linz: Linz OK Centrum für Gegenwartkunst Oberösterreich, 2001), p 25.

recalls: "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 could negotiate difference."[13] The *Babel Series* surely indexes Breitz's particular and fraught relationship to language, but at the same time it evinces the challenges facing any language that would transcend cultural boundaries. Presenting a line-up of globally-loved pop icons who scream fragments of their international hits at us, the artist seems to suggest that pop culture may be the only common language left to us, an empty version of the original Eden tongue.
Cumulatively, the sounds emanating from the monitors create an almost architectural compactness, an excruciating representation of a contemporary Tower of Babel[14]. Heard separately, each monitor rehearses a primal mantra reminiscent of an infant's first words. The childish regression evident in the *Babel Series* alludes to the way in which we are infantilized by the pop culture that we consume. Significantly, the *Babel Series* was the artist's first video installation to be exhibited and is also the first instance in which she introduced sound to her work. The "Me Me Me," "Ma Ma Ma," and "No No No" issuing from the *Babel Series* are therefore literally the first words that were ever uttered by a Breitz work.

*Karaoke* (2000) and *Alien (Ten Songs from Beyond)* (2002) further develop the implications of the *Babel Series.* The two installations function as amateur language laboratories in which Breitz tests the relationship between language and identity formation on the one hand, and the powerful role of popular culture in contemporary experience on the other. *Karaoke* consists of ten monitors arranged in a circle, facing inwards to surround the viewer.[15] Each monitor plays back the performance of a particular amateur singer who was invited to re-perform the hit song "Killing Me Softly" for Breitz in a New York karaoke bar.[16] Although Breitz deliberately chose ten performers who are not mother-tongue English speakers, the singers are implicitly connected to each other by their shared interest in the forms and values of American pop culture. The unsynchronized and simultaneous playback of the ten renditions of "Killing Me Softly" in the final installation creates a complex clash of accents and into nations, a veritable cacophony. Without receiving specific performing directions from the artist, despite their diverse linguistic backgrounds (Tamil, Russian, Vietnamese, Spanish), their faces reveal a common series of expressions and emotions. Small movements, like the raising of an eyebrow or the contraction of certain facial muscles, seem to correspond to the conventional vocabulary that we know from televisual culture, an expressive code made to convey basic feelings only. Through the collaboration of the volunteer performers, *Karaoke* testifies to the pervasive power of the culture industry and its insidious capacity to provide ready made models for subject formation - a theme Breitz later explores again in *Becoming* (2003). Breitz's self-professed love of pop culture is clearly tempered by a healthy skepticism: "The problem with pop, of course, is that the kinds of selves that it encourages us to invent are usually passive and predetermined, which means that rather than truly being offered a moment of self-invention, we are invited to shape

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[13] Candice Breitz interviewed by Magdalena Kröner, in M. Kröner, "Candice Breitz: Schreien, Stottern, Singen: Das Playback des Ich: Ein Gespräch mit Magdalena Kröner," in *Kunstforum,* Cologne, no. 168, January 2004.

[14] The biblical story of the Tower of Babel and the loss of the original universal language occurs at the end of the biblical chapters dealing with the origins of humanity and the mythical phase of the creation of the world and symbolizes the beginning of the historical period in which empires and cities were founded, Genesis 11: 1-9.

[15] The title refers to the form of entertainment launched in Japan in the seventies, which has since become popular worldwide. Patrons of suitably equipped bars display their vocal talents, singing along to pre-recorded hit songs and videos.

[16] "Killing Me Softly" first gained popularity as a Roberta Flack hit in the seventies. It was successfully revived by rap diva Lauryn Hill in the nineties.

ourselves in moulds which have already been poured."[17] The song lyrics performed in *Karaoke,* beyond expressing the lament of a lonely heart, become a moving declaration of powerlessness and the loss of subjective identity in the face of the mass media: "Singing my life with his words / Killing me softly with his song / Telling my whole life with his words."

This troubled relationship between the individual and a set of values predetermined by a dominant cultural and linguistic context is also at the heart of *Alien (Ten Songs from Beyond),* in which Breitz once again enlisted ten volunteer performers, all of whom had come to Berlin as foreigners and who thus like Breitz herself had experienced the estrangement of moving to a new and foreign language environment.[18] For their performances in *Alien,* each of the singers agreed to learn a popular German song, songs that Breitz had only recently come to know herself, through an intensive period of research upon her arrival in Berlin. These included folk music, the German national anthem, children's songs, and drinking songs, all selected specifically for their themes of home and belonging. After the singers had performed their newly learned songs against iconic Berlin backdrops, Breitz deleted the audio track from each of the performances, replacing the foreigners' voices with those of ten native German-speakers. The often visible slip page between the singers' lips and the heard words suggests that the alien at stake is not the immigrant but language itself. The foreign tongue becomes a dispossessing force occupying a body uncapable of defending itself: "This battle with language, the battle to possess language as opposed to being possessed by language is in some sense what is at stake in *Alien."*[19] To stress the idea of an unavoidable fight, ten singers are positioned on monitors atop pedestals that line the perimeter of a large space, facing outwards such that only the back of the monitors can be seen from the center of the room. The claustrophobic spaces that remain between each monitor and the wall bound each visitor to a confrontational encounter with the work.

Spoken language, as transformed in solidified matter, is the core subject of *Soliloquy Trilogy* (2000). The work is a series of three short films, each of which consists of a sequence of excerpts from a Hollywood movie: *Basic Instinct, Dirty Harry,* and *The Witches of Eastwick.*[20] In each case, Breitz isolates and chronologically strings together each and every vocal moment of the leading character, thus allowing a predetermined rule to govern her editing process. *Soliloquy (Sharon),* Breitz's re-edit of *Basic Instinct,* in the end lasts just over seven minutes. The moments of psychological and erotic tension that characterized the source film are to a large extent lost in Breitz's version, as Stone's character rambles through a series of repetitive, narcissistic, and apparently unmotivated statements. The artist metes out similar treatment to Clint Eastwood's taciturn Inspector Callaghan and Jack Nicholson's exuberant Devil in the other two films in the *Trilogy.* Respectively, they last only six and fourteen minutes. At the beginning of each of the three short films, white time-code on a black ground announces the exact duration of the coming film. In their obsession with duration, these stark time-code screens are reminiscent of On Kawara's *Date Paintings.* In place of the Japanese artist's notation of day, month, and year, Breitz records the number of minutes, seconds, and frames of footage that have survived her editing process. Though

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[17] R. Stange, op. cit.

[18] Breitz began production on *Alien* only weeks after she had moved to Berlin from her previous long-time base in New York.

[19] M. Kröner, op. cit.

[20] These Hollywood movies were released in 1992, 1971, and 1987, respectively. The original length of each is 127 min., 102 min, and 118 min.

visible for only a few seconds each, these minimal time code screens are the key to understanding the *Soliloquy Trilogy,* slyly revealing the conceptual logic at the core of Breitz's work.

The hardness of the verbal element, here in the form of the monologue spoken by each actor, testifies to Breitz's conviction that Hollywood cinema, like other forms of mass culture, is designed for passive consumption, providing neither stimulus nor any possibility of access to its monolithic structure. In her work, she critically reacts to the models offered by the mass media. As she says: "I want to crack pop open" As with her photographic series, Breitz's strategy is to critically exaggerate the quintessential nature of the phenomenon she is exploring. Hence, each of the iconic figures in the *Soliloquy Trilogy* spews out a monologue that offers no possibility for dialogue or interruption, a series of questions that remains stiflingly unanswered. The obsessive presence of the stars on her screen always seems about to crush the spectator.

The danger of the annihilation of the viewer is a theme that Breitz explores even more brutally in her installation *Becoming* (2003). Here, Breitz performs in her work for the first time, clearly including herself among those at risk. In this case, the visitors' experience of the work is linked to his or her own movements through the space. Each of the seven dual channel components of the fourteen-channel installation *Becoming* stands in the exhibition space like a two-headed Janus on one side of the installation, a monitor displays a short scene acted out in lush color footage by a Hollywood actress, while on a second monitor that is placed back-to-back with the first, Breitz herself re-performs the very same scene in somber black-and-white footage. Desperately seeking an identity, Breitz strives to mimic the movements and facial expressions of actresses such as Cameron Diaz, Julia Roberts, Jennifer Lopez, Meg Ryan, Neve Campbell, Reese Witherspoon, and Drew Barrymore, displaying a wide range of current Hollywood stars and starlettes.[21] Everyday incidents and emotions are brought to the screen by the actresses and, with a commitment that betrays the limited range of emotions and expressions that are typically on offer in mainstream cinema, by Breitz herself. Her efforts as an amateur actor map a territory of desire, a vast land whose broadness is defined by the amount of people who, consciously or unconsciously, live to emulate their favorite stars.

One could describe Breitz as a "deranged fan." An ambivalent relationship to the culture that she recycles is certainly at the heart of her work and the artist admits that she enjoys the pop music she uses as much as she watches the films she tears into pieces. In common with other artists of the current and previous generations-one thinks of Douglas Gordon, Francesco Vezzoli, and Eija-Liisa Athila-Breitz's intimate relationship with the subject matter of her art first began at home, listening to the radio, watching TV, and most importantly, playing with a video machine, a Betamax recorder in her case. As trivial as it might be, the domestic availability of such run of the mill technology is a fundamental fact, as the spread of the home video camera, first marketed by Sony in 1965, was to the development of the first generation of video artists internationally. Breitz describes her early relationship with the family Betamax as a moment of discovery - the discovery that information needed not be digested whole and in the form in which it is received, the discovery that rather than passively absorbing the media, one could pick and choose, fast forward and rewind, actively cut and paste a story of one's own making. Of course, this is not to suggest that the acquisition of a recording device can make an artist out of any individual. What it does suggest is that the critical value of the artist's gesture lies in the understanding of the act of re-writing a semiotic text -

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[21] The respective movies are: *Sweetest Thing* (2002); *Pretty Woman* (1990); *Angel Eyes* (2001); *You've Got Mail* (1999); *Three to Tango* (1999); *Legally Blonde* (2001); *Wishful Thinking* (1997).

whether it be an MTV video or a feature film. It is exactly the enclosed environment of the home and the intimate proximity to the media that new spaces for creativity can open up.

According to Nicolas Bourriaud's definition, the re-writing process is a normal part of current post-production practice.[22] In Breitz's case, the computer technology she works with is similar to that employed by deejays and by some composers who employ sampling techniques to create new compositions using fragments of pre-arranged musical phrases or noise, vocals, or other existing sounds. Like those who compose in sound, Breitz defends the use of images of singers and actors in her own work, pleading the right of "common ownership." She says: "We buy our rights every time we go to the movies, every time we buy a CD, every time we switch on the television or read a glossy magazine." Each of us holds a stake in mass culture, Breitz implies. What she does is infuse it with a vitality that otherwise stays hidden. Describing her own digital processing, Breitz replaces the idea of animation with what she terms "re-animation."

In his book *Infancy and History,* the philosopher Giorgio Agamben builds on Walter Benjamin's conclusion that the modern individual suffers from a poverty of experience. As Agamben states: "The question of experience can be approached nowadays only with an acknowledgment that it is no longer accessible to us. For just as modern man has been deprived of his biography, his experience has likewise been expropriated. Indeed, his incapacity to have and communicate experiences is perhaps one of few self-certainties to which he can lay claim.[23] For Agamben, it is this inability to share experience that makes everyday existence unbearable. In conversation with Breitz, it emerges that it is precisely this awareness of the distance that seems to separate the contemporary individual from reality that inspired her to make *Mother + Father* (2005). "Much of my work deals with the question of how we become who we are and to what extent this process is influenced by our absorption of the values sold to us by the mainstream media. More and more, we learn who we are - our personal vocabulary of words, gestures, and expressions - not only through our parents and from our immediate social contexts, but also by watching TV, listening to the radio, going to the movies, and reading glossy magazines The media has gradually come to share (and in certain instances to take over) the complex job of raising us. Taking to heart 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."

The double video installation *Mother + Father,* shown in public for the first time at Castello di Rivoli Museum of Contemporary Art, is evidence of the new degree of complexity that Breitz has achieved at this point in her artistic career. The work is split into two distinct installations, each consisting of six videos broadcast on screen. The first, entitled *Mother,* features Faye Dunaway, Susan Sarandon, Meryl Streep, Diane Keaton, Julia Roberts and Shirley MacLaine, while in *Father* the six fathers are portrayed by Tony Danza, Dustin Hoffman, Harvey Keitel, Steve Martin, Donald Sutherland, and Jon Voight. The protagonists' original performances were created for Hollywood movies centered on family relationships, including dramas like *Kramer vs. Kramer* or light

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[22] N. Bourriaud, *Postproduction. La culture comme scénario: comment l'art reprogramme le monde contemporain,* (Dijon: Les presses du réel, 2002).

[23] G. Agamben, *Infancy and History, Essay on the Destruction of Experience,* translated by Liz Heron, (London: Verso, 1993).

comedies such as *Father of the Bride*.[24] Here, Breitz manipulates the film clips, reshaping the original narrative structure and providing a new audiovisual experience. Isolating carefully chosen fragments from the films, the artist erases the context that lends meaning to each scene. Using a special digital process enabling her to cut the character from the scene and place him or her against a black background, she obliterates the entire set along with any other actors who may be present. The fragments are then reassembled in a fresh sequence and shown on plasma screens, one for each actor. Confined in a specific space and constrained by the endless repetition of the cycle of the digital display, the actors are condemned to live forever with their characters. They become the protagonists in a mutual exchange of phrases orchestrated by the artist so as to reveal the peculiarities of each character. The male and female characters belong to different worlds and are presented in separate exhibitions rooms, but arranged symmetrically to mirror each other.

Cruel or sweet-natured, stressed-out or affectionate, maternal characteristics are strongly exaggerated in the Hollywood vision of motherhood. The types seen here range from Faye Dunaway's grotesque interpretation of Joan Crawford to Julia Roberts, a sexy beauty melodramatically transformed into a step mother. The fathers have the features and attitudes of tough but nonetheless fragile men, trying to find their role in life and fighting to win back their children. The characters include a father destroyed by pain as played by Donald Sutherland and Dustin Hoffman as a man just learning what it means to be a father. Breitz's own script, put together using a "cut-and-paste" technique, calls for a sequence of easy-to-read and recognizable gestures, words, pauses, phrases, and looks, drawn from a predetermined repertoire of expressions with unmistakable meaning. Tears, embraces, smiles, and cries depict the corresponding emotions of pain, affection, joy, and despair, while the phrases and dialogues leave no room whatsoever for any ambiguity. Themes such as parent-child relationships, the realization of what the role of parent entails and the difficulties it brings, and relationships with the apposite sex are expressed in simple phrases like "Why can't you give me the respect that I'm entitled to?" spoken by Faye Dunaway, while Julia Roberts wails "I wish my mom was here," adding "I never wanted to be a mom". Similarly, in *Father,* Tony Danza demands "Total control," Donald Sutherland says "I wanna talk to you," and Jon Voight complains "I'm sick of taking care of you." In *Diorama* (2003), Breitz conducted a skillful analysis of family dynamics based on *Dallas,* the famous soap opera inspired by the lives of a wealthy dynasty of oil magnates. Compared to the TV characters, the movie actors in Breitz's *Mother* and *Father* are more articulate and their statements more complex but an initial reading suggests that the accuracy of the portraits she presents in *Mother* and *Father* expose the limitations of the typological range to which commercial cinema confines these two figures, representing them as extreme simplifications of archetypal models that belong to mythology.

Sometimes emotive, amusing, or disconcerting, the theater that Breitz deploys in this double video installation produces a further effect, one that can be defined as "the unbelievability of fiction." The same characters that some of us have loved on screen, the stories and happenings that have enthralled so many moviegoers, are exposed in a way that reveals just how much artifice they involve. If the problems of Joanna Kramer, the young mother coming to grips with divorce, could have moved us, or the tears shed by the father in *Ordinary People* seemed to define a new kind of masculinity, Breitz's version with its cuts and concentration on certain gestures and vocal and facial

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[24]According to the installation order, the original movies from which the actresses are extracted for *Mother* are: *Mommie Dearest* (1981); *Stepmom* (1998); *Kramer vs. Kramer* (1979); *The Good Mother* (1988); again *Stepmom* (1998); *Postcards from the Edge* (1990). The actors of *Father* also appear in: *She's Out of Control* (1989); *Kramer vs. Kramer* (1979); *Imaginary Crimes* (1994); *Father of the Bride* (1991) ; *Ordinary People* (1980); *The Champ* (1979).

expressions smashes it all to smithereens. In the words of Roland Barthes: "What is the filmic image (including the sound)? A lure. This word must be taken in its analytical sense." Attempting to explain the hypnotic fascination of cinema, Barthes sees himself in an enclosed space with the image, forming part of the dual relationship on which imagination is based. "The image is there, before me, for me." Analogical, universal, and meaningful, it combines signifier and signified. It is the perfect illusion. "I hurt myself at it like an animal at a 'lifelike' rag waving in front of it; and of course the image perpetuates in the subject. I believe I am the misunderstanding attached to the self and to the Imaginary"[25]. Breitz's vision shatters the illusion that Barthes describes. As soon as we begin to fall under the emotional spell of one of the actors or the character portrayed, succumbing to the magic of cinema, the digital image immediately jams. The face is distorted by a kind of nervous shudder, the lips continually repeat half-spoken words, and the gestures become spasmodic and absurd.

Digital manipulation allows Breitz to sample images, arrange them in sequence, and invert them back-to-front. A consequence of her digital montage is an effect which she describes as the "digital twitch," a cruel ailment that afflicts most of her characters and the actors of *Mother* and *Father* with more serious complications. Manifesting it self as uncontrollable shudders or sudden breaks in the flow of a gesture, the "digital twitch" can be compared to the scars on the body of Frankenstein's monster. It reveals the origins of the "creature" and how it has been created by joining carefully chosen pieces together. In accordance with the finest traditions of Gothic literature, resistance and potential rebellion by the "monster" against the one who seeks to mould it are a perpetual danger in the battle between creature and creator. It is precisely the disruption caused by "digital twitch" and the gaps it opens up that reveal the level to which the chosen images resist the artist. It is an unequal struggle, but to steal a phrase from the language of cinema, it is *to be continued.*

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[25] R. Barthes, "Upon Leaving the Movie Theater," in *Communications,* New York, no. 23, 1980.