

CANDICE BREITZ

IN THE STUDIO WITH SUE WILLIAMSON

IT WAS MARCH 1994. With South Africa's first democratic election about to take place, the atmosphere on the streets of Johannesburg was electric. Euphoria and excitement were mixed with swirling uncertainties about the future. It was also the moment that Candice Breitz learned she had been awarded a Fulbright scholarship to pursue graduate studies at the University of Chicago. Should she stay in Johannesburg and revel in the new freedom, or should she go? Torn by the decision, Breitz cast her vote in April 1994, then left, headed for her own future, which would include degrees in art history at the University of Chicago and Columbia University, and a year in the Whitney's Independent Study Program. Over the past decade, she has seen a steady rise in international recognition, including a slew of solo museum shows and participation in the biennials of Sao Paulo, Istanbul, Johannesburg, Gwangju, Taipei and Venice.

Today, based in Berlin, Breitz is known for her incisive and deeply engaging large-scale video installations, consisting of numerous monitors or plasma screens, sometimes suspended from the ceiling or arranged side by side in a curving row. These dynamic works exert enormous popular appeal. In the Italian pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2005, people queued to see *Mother + Father* (2005), two six-screen installations that give a scorching view of parenthood as portrayed in such Hollywood films as *Kramer vs. Kramer* and *Postcards from the Edge*. The same scene was repeated at Sonnabend in New York and *White Cube* in London when, later that year, Breitz showed *Mother + Father* again, this time alongside King (A Portrait of Michael Jackson), for which Breitz invited 16 hardcore Michael Jackson fans to perform the entire Thriller album, and *Queen (A Portrait of Madonna)*, with 30 Italian fans of the star singing their way through her immaculate Collection album (both 2005).

For many of her works, Breitz draws on sources from popular culture, particularly the movies with which her audience is already warmly familiar. This cozy attitude, however, is rudely disrupted by the Breitz edit. Deeply interested in semantics and patterns of influence, and in how Hollywood movies compete with the traditional role of parents in teaching children notions of appropriate behavior, Breitz reshapes her material. Cutting to excerpts of essential dialogue, trimming away all extraneous set dressing and isolating her characters against an unrecognizing black background, Breitz arranges her clips so as to resonate uncannily from one to the next, laying bare the way that stereo-types are perpetuated from one movie to another.

Candice Breitz at Kunsthau Bregezen, Austria, 2010. Photo: Alek Fahl.

COMING SOON

"Candice Breitz: The Character," a retrospective at the Australian Centre for the Moving Image, Melbourne, Dec. 6, 2012-Mar. 10, 2013.

Breitz has consistently pursued two parallel trajectories. Alongside the found-footage work for which she first gained renown (initiated in 1999 with *Babel Series*, jerky loops of pop stars like Madonna and Sting endlessly repeating a baby syllable, like "ba ba ba" or "da da da"), she has often engaged nonprofessional actors to create original footage. (The earliest work in this lineage is *Karaoke*, 2000, in which the viewer enters a circle of 10 video screens, each with a tightly framed face belting out "Killing Me Softly.")

For an upcoming retrospective at the Australian Centre for the Moving Image (ACMI) in Melbourne, which will open in December 2012 and travel to the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Mass., in spring 2013, Breitz is working on a new trilogy of video installations, as yet untitled, that have been co-commissioned by the two exhibiting institutions. For them, the artist will shoot her footage in Bombay, Lagos and Los Angeles, the locations of the world's three largest filmmaking industries: Bollywood, Nollywood and, of course, Hollywood. In each city, Breitz will begin by exploring the role of the child in that particular cinematic culture.

I met with Breitz in the Iziko South African National Gallery, Cape Town, in April.

SUE WILLIAMSON Candice, first of all, what was your idea in putting these three film-producing centers up side by side, as it were?

CANDICE BREITZ What the three film industries have in common, despite the multiple differences and nuances that distinguish them from one another, is the way that Hollywood, Bollywood and Nollywood keep a grip on the popular imagination and maintain their broad reach and economic dominance through their ability to consistently and continuously spew out aspirational narratives.

How these narratives are woven into the plot and esthetic of a given film differs significantly from one wood to the next, but each of these cinematic giants ultimately maintains its hold on the mainstream by selling us fairly digestible stories that are designed to appease us, to offer us visions of lives that are better, braver, happier, thinner—and, importantly, to keep us coming back for more. I thought it would be interesting to explore the machinery of the three industries by paying a visit to each and taking a look at how child actors are woven into that texture.

WILLIAMSON Why child rather than adult actors?

BREITZ Each of the woods has its own set of conventions that it perpetuates and nat-



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Above, two stills from *The Character*, 2011, single-channel video installation, approx. 23 minutes. All images, unless otherwise noted, courtesy White Cube, London.

Right, view of the installation *Babal Series*, 1999, 7 looping DVDs; at the OK Center for Contemporary Art, Linz, Austria. Photo: Jason Mandella.

realizes to some extent for its audience. These tend to be played out relatively seamlessly by the adult actors, whose ability to reproduce dramatic conventions is typically a precondition for their acceptance into the industry.

With child actors, there's often a slip-page: the mastery is incomplete. When played out by children, familiar conventions can come across quite awkwardly, which means that they become legible as such; they lose their naturalism. Observing child actors [in the process of learning] is a little like watching a child walking in the shoes of an adult. Children tend to give the game away.

WILLIAMSON I enjoyed *The Character*, the short film you made in Bombay in 2011 as a prelude to this new project.

BREITZ *The Character* takes a look at how children are portrayed within Bollywood plots, through the eyes of a group of Indian schoolchildren. Each of the children I interviewed was asked to closely view a particular film. All of the selected films had children as their key protagonists. There are 13 kids in the final edit, and each kid describes the specific child character from his or her film in painstaking detail. A composite “character” is then shaped in the editing process, so that although the schoolchildren are speaking about a variety of child characters, they end up painting a larger picture of what is

expected of a child character according to Bollywood conventions. Via their very specific answers to my questions, the kids end up cataloging the qualities and values that are central to mainstream Hindi cinema.

WILLIAMSON Again you've used a black background, and all the children seem to seamlessly morph into each other as they enthusiastically describe what happened to the children in the films they watched. The openness of their responses is refreshing. What else will be in the ACOMI show?

BREITZ The exhibition will focus on a variety of works that relate—in one way or another—to the genre of portraiture. It will open with *The Character*, then meander through to *Him + Her* [2008]. In addition there will be *King (A Portrait of Michael Jackson)* [2005], *Becoming* [2003] and a selection of dual-channel portraits from a larger series titled “Factum” [2010], for which I interviewed several pairs of identical twins.

WILLIAMSON Tell me about *Him + Her*.
BREITZ *Him + Her* is a pair of seven-channel installations that could each be described as a portrait of sorts, though ultimately each of the portraits reveals less about the two actors portrayed—Jack Nicholson and Meryl Streep—than it does about the art of playing a role, the art of becoming a character. *Him* places 23 Jack Nicholsons [from a range of films



made over 40 years] into confrontation with one another, while *Her* is essentially a showdown between 28 Meryl Streeps [that appeared over a period of 30 years].

The actor is in each case thrown into a series of psychological encounters with him- or herself multiplied across a seven-screen structure. The interaction of the character fragments is fluid in the way that a kaleidoscope is fluid, and ultimately fails to deliver a stable representation of either Nicholson or

Streep; the shards of Jack and Meryl) intertwine, form knots, coalesce, unravel.

WILLIAMSON In working the way you have, with this found footage, you've taken sequences from films which are huge commercial hits. You have told me you have been referred to as a “cultural pirate.”

BREITZ [laughs] Could well be. . . .
WILLIAMSON I'm just wondering if you've ever run into problems with copyright.

BREITZ Miraculously, so far when people who appear in some way in my work have approached me, it's been largely from a position of curiosity or interest. Those conversations have generally panned out positively.

I know, or in some cases have been told, that several of the actors who have appeared in my found-footage pieces have seen the work—Susan Sarandon, Meryl Streep, Steve

Martin—and I'm happy to say that I haven't had any legal problems yet.

Culture is fundamentally a cannibalistic thing. Every move that we make as artists consciously or unconsciously derives from—draws on, relates to—an existing conversation, which implies an existing vocabulary, an existing set of options for expression. It's not tenable to enter the world and invent a completely new language; we feed off

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and relate to what precedes us—we cite, we quote, we respond. Though this is more patently the case in the work of artists who use found footage, and though the accessibility of digital software has certainly encouraged more direct citation in the last decade or so, I think all of us artists

WILLIAMSON The technology that we have today has brought that to the surface. It used to be an enormously complicated process to edit videos in expensive video-edit suites, but now everybody can make almost a broadcast quality movie on their laptops.

BREITZ That's more and more true, but there are still a great number of decisions that need to be made when one cites, and they are as nuanced as ever: how much material one wants to cite, how one does it, and most importantly, why one wants to work this way in the first place. To cite from a particular context—a Hollywood movie, for example—could be to celebrate the source film, or to engage it critically, depending on the particular way in which the citation appears in its new context, on how it is woven into the work at large.

WILLIAMSON Where did you start as an artist?

BREITZ After leaving art school at the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, my starting point was photography. I was never a photographer proper but spent a few years thinking about the semantics of visual imagery by way of photographic montage. From a formal point of view, I was interested in what it meant to cut up images and put them back together again in new constellations, in how you could develop a fresh punctuation via a series of simple cut-and-paste moves. I suppose there was something almost linguistic about the way I was dealing with photographic images—there was a time in my life when I fantasized about studying linguistics—so what got me interested in starting to work with video, around 1999, was the possibility of working more literally with language, and, of course, with sound.

Opposite top, *Her*, 2008.
7-channel video installation, approx. 24 minutes.
Opposite bottom, *Him*, 2008.
7-channel video installation, approx. 29 minutes.
Both installations at the Kunsthalle Berlin. Photos: Jens Zieme.

Working with moving footage gave me an expanded set of variables with which to think about language and punctuation, about the subtle and not-so-subtle ways in which the structure of an edit impacts on the experience of the work and the meaning that a viewer is able to draw from it. Meaning can be generated by the timing of a cut, through the visibility or seamlessness of a cut. That which is excluded—the material that ends up on the proverbial cutting-room floor—can shape the meaning of a work in its absence as powerfully as the footage that makes the final cut. I've always been more invested in the editing process—the beauty of a great tweak or an articulate recomposition—than in the notion of trying to create something original from scratch.

WILLIAMSON On the subject of cutting and recomposition, let's talk about the here and now. We are sitting in the National Gallery in Cape Town, where for the first time since you left South Africa in 1994, you have a major solo show in this country, which opened at the Standard Bank Gallery in Johannesburg.

BREITZ On many levels, it was devastating to leave the country at that moment in time. So when the opportunity arose to finally show some work in South Africa, it was impossible to not think about 1994. It became the date everything spun around, primarily in terms of the radical historical and political significance of the date, but also in terms of my personal history. The earliest work included in the [Standard Bank] exhibition is *Ghost Series*, a set of photographs that were made at the time of my departure to study abroad.

WILLIAMSON In *Ghost Series* you took the kind of tourist postcards which show traditionally dressed black women in rural settings, and you used Tipp-EX [White-Out] to whiten out the details of the women, leaving only details like their eyes, noses and mouths, their beadwork, and their skirts. Their faces have become skull-like or masklike, and they do indeed look like ghosts rather than women grinding maize, or whatever they would have been doing in their daily lives.

BREITZ I think the postcards that were the starting point for *Ghost Series* ultimately tell us far less about the black women that they picture than they do about the particular way in which whiteness tends to think about blackness. Postcards like these are typically produced by white photographers to be

sold to white tourists. They are very much about locating Africa in an unthreatening past, a past that is rural and exotic. Signs of contemporary life are deliberately excluded—there are no speakers or Coke bottles to disrupt the exotic idyll. Nothing within the postcard allows for the fact that the women portrayed have a relationship to traditional culture but also exist very much in the present.

WILLIAMSON You are from a comfortable middle-class background. Has there ever been a criticism in that doing this, in whitening out the bodies of the women, you were perpetuating the kind of process which you've repudiated these women to exotic symbols?

BREITZ Very much so. The work was very controversial at the time that I made it. In applying a ghostly whiteness to the surface of those images, I felt I was rendering legible—with quite a literal gesture—the way in which the complexity of contemporary Africa is elided by images that suspend the continent and its subjects in the past. But not everybody read the work that way.

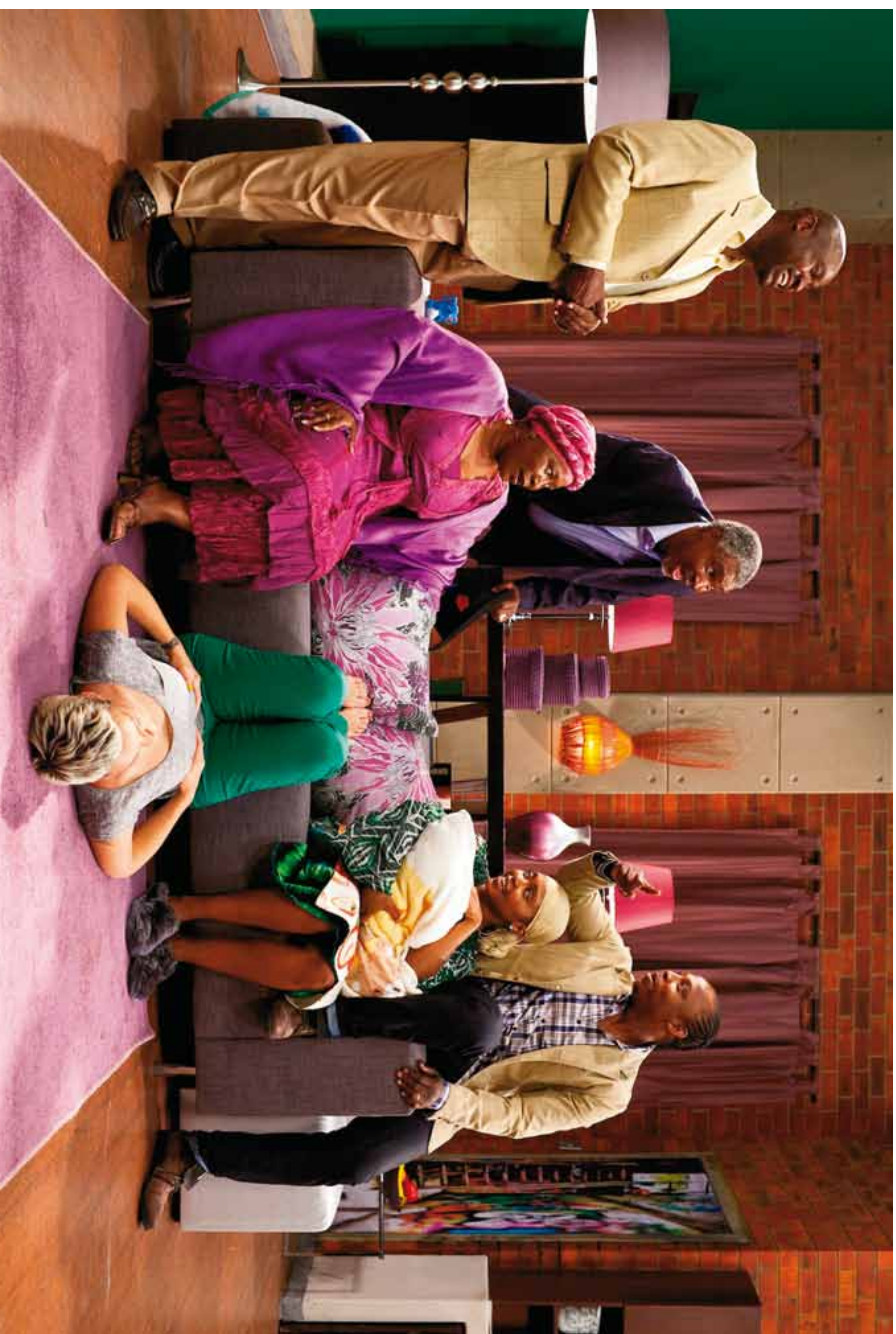
WILLIAMSON Alongside *Ghost Series*, your exhibition at the Standard Bank Gallery in Johannesburg included a 2011 work the firm commissioned, *Extra*. Here you insert yourself as a white presence into a series of scenes from "Generations," Africa's most popular soap opera, resulting in a series of photographs as well as a single-channel video installation. One can definitely see the link between *Ghost Series*, the last work you made before you left in 1994, and this newer work. How did *Extra* come into being?

BREITZ One of the things that attracted me to "Generations" in the early phase of my research was that it was first broadcast in 1994. That year, of course, marks the moment that the South African Broadcasting Corporation began to radically reconsider its role. Having been the mouthpiece of the apartheid government, the SABC was forced—in the moment of political transformation—to start addressing the broader South African viewership, using the full range of 11 languages spoken in the country. The creator of the show, Mthuli Vundla, had been in exile in California, and he came back thinking he might do a South African version of "Hill Street Blues." But the SABC wanted something aspirational, something that would make suitable viewing for the emerging black middle class of the new South Africa. "Generations" portrays the



Above, *Ghost Series* #3, 1994-96, chromogenic print, 27 by 40 inches. Courtesy Kauffmann Repetto, Milan.
 Right, *Extra* #5, 2011, transparency in aluminum light box, 22 by 33 by 3 1/2 inches. Courtesy Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg.

“THE ABSURDITY OF MY PRESENCE IN EXTRA IS—FOR ME—A WAY OF STAGING AND THINKING ABOUT THE AWKWARDNESS OF BEING A WHITE SOUTH AFRICAN.”



daily ordeals of two rival advertising agencies, one owned by a Xhosa family, and the other by a Zulu family.

WILLIAMSON So, there's the aspirational element again, this time specifically in a South African context. And "Generations" has English subtitles, so that although all the actors are black, and slide easily from Xhosa to Zulu to English, even white South Africans who generally can't speak a black language can understand.

BREITZ In fact, the starting point for *Extra* was a commission that invited me to make a work that in one way or another reflected on contemporary South Africa. It was an invitation that was both exciting and intimidating. Having lived away from South Africa since 1994, I was apprehensive about whether I would be able to meaningfully engage what is a very complex context from a somewhat removed vantage point. My instinct from the outset was that the work would need—in some way—to have built into it an acknowledgement of my externality, of my outsider status.

WILLIAMSON And how did you make the connection with the producers of "Generations"?
BREITZ Mundi Wunda is a great supporter of contemporary art. *Extra* would not have been possible if he had not been so incredibly open to my proposal.

WILLIAMSON It does seem an act of extraordinary generosity on his part, and that of the actors, to allow you onto the

set, and after each scene was shot for the television series, to shoot a second version immediately afterward, with you taking up whatever position you had decided upon after having just watched the actors play through the scene.

BREITZ I thought it would be appropriate to insert myself into the soap as an extra. An extra is typically a background player whose job is to not be noticed or distract attention from the primary plot. That said, I wanted to avoid being a naturalistic extra, though I have no lines, though I am external to the plot. I knew I would inevitably be very obviously present, simply by virtue of the color of my skin, in relation to the otherwise entirely black cast of actors.

WILLIAMSON One story about *Extra* in the local press was titled "The White Elephant in the Room."
BREITZ I thought that was a pretty astute response! Whiteness is very much the elephant in the room in contemporary South Africa; that which is not spoken about terribly much but nevertheless exerts an influence that is unavoidable at best, destructive at worst.

WILLIAMSON And so if you were not a naturalistic extra, what were you?
BREITZ I didn't want to occupy a single position, so there are moments when I seem to participate and moments when I am an obstacle, an obstruction, inhibiting what would otherwise be a relatively straightforward narrative. At other times I look on almost melancholically or

voyeuristically from the background as if longing to be a part of something it's hard to intercept oneself into. I thought it was important to not point to one set of conclusions, to try out a range of possibilities and a variety of awkwardnesses. During the making of *Extra*, the set of "Generations" came to function as a microcosm through which to think about social dynamics in South Africa at large.

WILLIAMSON In one scene, two people are having a meal and you are lying across the table between them with your feet sticking upward.

BREITZ The playfulness of some of my interventions is possible largely because of the distance South Africa has traveled since 1994. At the time of making *Ghost Series*, it would have been impossible to reflect on race in a

lighthearted manner, for obvious reasons. The absurdity of my presence in *Extra* is—for me—a way of staging and thinking about the awkwardness of being a white South African. It allows me to take up questions that remain delicate and complex without assuming that I can provide easy answers. Ideally, you are left to draw your own conclusions. ◊

—Candice Breitz, "The Character" will travel to the Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, Mass., in spring 2013.
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