



Clip Art

In Candice Breitz's video installations, movie stars and everyday people get caught up in a sea of competing voices

BY HILARIE M. SHEETS

"Within any consciousness there is a Greek chorus, a mess of intertwined voices," observes Candice Breitz, a South African-born video installation artist now based in Berlin. "There's the voice that you use to address a stranger versus the voice you use to speak to a friend or a child or a colleague or a lover; the voice that is at the helm when you're feeling particularly self-confident and cocky versus the voice that takes over during moments of low self-esteem and doubt." The 37-year-old artist is best known for appropriating fragments of celebrity performances and using them to create witty, perceptive installations that analyze our own personal and cultural obsessions. She wonders, "What would it mean to go into group therapy with oneself and put these competing voices into conversation?"

That's just what Breitz has done, with the unwitting assistance of Jack Nicholson and Meryl Streep, who both have been co-opted to serve as the artist's everyman and everywoman. In *Him* (1968–2008), on view from the 19th of this month through March 21 at Yvon Lambert in New York, a constellation of Jacks plucked from 23 films rant, cajole, preen, and argue with one another in black space across seven large plasma screens suspended from a steel structure in a floral, Rorschach-like formation. "Looking for me?" asks the 50-year-

ABOVE Breitz in her studio.
OPPOSITE Jack Nicholson interacting with himself as different characters in the installation *Him*, 1968–2008 (top), and ardent Marley fans (bottom) performing in the 2005 installation *Legend (A Portrait of Bob Marley)*.

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old actor in *The Witches of Eastwick*. “Do you know who I am?” he responds at age 69 in *The Departed*. “I’m a goddamn marvel of modern science!” he shouts as a 38-year-old playing in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*.

The “him” that emerges from these stolen moments is a figure of supreme narcissism, with little connection to any reality beyond his own. Meanwhile, the “her” debating herself in a similar setup in another room at the gallery (where Breitz’s work has sold for more than \$300,000), seems defined by her relationships with others, particularly men. “He told me I was beautiful.” “You want me to marry him, don’t you?” “Why is your freedom more important than mine?” “Well, it’s not what I dreamed of as a girl,” intones a kaleidoscope of Meryls excavated from 28 films, ranging from *The Deer Hunter*, when she was 29, to *Lions for Lambs*, when she was 58.

“During the early stages of the editing, it was astounding how a whole slew of clichés about masculinity and femininity came rushing to the surface,” says Breitz. “I decided not to resist the values and norms that were central to the source movies but instead to magnify these messages and push them

to a level of neurotic absurdity.” Breitz spent three years on this project, plumbing vast quantities of footage and closely studying the actors’ personal quirks—like Nicholson’s persistent throat clearing as a result of his smoking and Streep’s chronic nail biting—which helped her craft a story without having an actual plot. She then orchestrated her snippets of dialogue on the plasma screens almost the way a composer might. “I started to think of those seven positions as different musical instruments that bounce off each other and have a rhythmic relationship,” she says. Once she had her rough cuts, she handed them over to a team of ten as-

sistants who cut the footage from the movies, frame by frame, with digital tools. “In order to get the aesthetic I want, the actors have to be placed in a black abstract space,” she explains. The process has filled the past year.

While she intends her work to critique mainstream culture, Breitz, who graduated with a degree in fine art from the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, admits there is nothing she likes more than a great Hollywood movie or MTV video. A manic downloader of music—everything from klezmer to hip-hop—she also indulges in karaoke from time to time.

When Breitz moved to the United States in 1993 to earn her master’s degree in art history from the University of Chicago, her new friends at school nicknamed her Forrest Gump because of her apparent cluelessness. “I may have looked like an American or European kid, but my cultural and political and social baggage was so different—I just didn’t know the codes,” says Breitz. Nevertheless, she was fascinated to discover that she and her friends shared a base of pop-culture memories. “We had all listened to Madonna when we were teenagers. We all remembered how hot Brad Pitt was in *Thelma and Louise*. It suggested a potential to me that I thought would be interesting to tap.”

Exploiting this communal language, Breitz raided the global

archive of MTV music videos for her “Babel Series,” in which she endlessly repeated single syllables extracted from the mouths of stars such as Madonna, Freddie Mercury, and Grace Jones to create a cacophony of primal sounds. She conceived the work in 1999 while pursuing a Ph.D. in art history at Columbia University in New York, where her focus was on Warhol, and presented it at the Istanbul Biennial that year. “I still think of that work as being a primitive key to what I’ve been doing ever since,” says Breitz, who at that time intended to be an art historian. By 2002—when she chose to move to Berlin in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, withdrawing from her Ph.D. candidacy—she felt confident enough to commit herself to being an artist full time.

While Breitz generally knows precisely what she is looking for when she manipulates her found footage, she points out that she’s more flexible when working with amateur performers, as in the 2005 pieces *King (A Portrait of Michael Jackson)* and *Legend (A Portrait of Bob Marley)*, the latter included in the recent Prospect.1 New Orleans. To attract performers, she sent out media blitzes looking for dedicated fans

of the musicians and whittled down the nearly 1,500 responses, to those from people who best described how their lives had been affected by one of the performers. Breitz then invited each to sing one of the musician’s hits and built composite portraits based on the fans’ performing in messy unison on monitors. The artist was more exacting with herself when she lip-synched advice on relationships delivered in films by seven well-known actresses, including Cameron Diaz and Reese Witherspoon, in “Becoming,” 2003, a series of split-screen pieces.

As for how the appropriated stars feel about Breitz’s work, Susan Sarandon—one of six actresses used in *Mother*, which appeared to great acclaim at the 2005 Venice Biennale—contacted her directly to get more information about the piece, while Steve Martin, Clint Eastwood, and Streep have been spotted at galleries watching themselves, but Breitz has had no indication of how they felt. So far she’s had no legal problems and feels she could defend her practice as fair use. Breitz, who will have a solo show at the Power Plant in Toronto this fall, is pleased that her work is accessible to a very wide audience. “I’m trying to forge a bridge between the little bubble that is contemporary art,” she says, “and a much broader Hollywood culture that is embraced by so many more people.” ■

OPPOSITE Stills
from *Father*,
2005 (top left),
and from *Mother*,
2005 (top right).
“Babel Series,”
1999 (bottom).
RIGHT Drew
Barrymore and
Breitz in stills
from *Becoming*
Drew, from
the series
“Becoming,”
2003.