

Candice Breitz

Babel Series

January 2000

francesca kaufmann inaugurated in January 2000 with a seven-channel video-installation by Candice Breitz the *Babel Series*, previewed a few months before at the Istanbul Biennale. Since opening, the gallery has aimed at hosting ambitious exhibitions and site-specific installations, encompassing a range of media including, video, photography, performance, painting and sculpture.

The *Babel Series* consists of seven constantly stuttering DVD loops. Each steals a fragment of footage from the history of music video. The content of each video is relentlessly simple and literally monosyllabic: the seven different moments are appropriated from various pop performances (the line-up ranges from Madonna, Wham and Grace Jones to Queen, Prince, Abba and the Police). Each of the seven moments is then trapped in repetition as it is looped endlessly and noisily before the viewer on a series of television monitors.

The seven loops play simultaneously in the space of the installation, creating a cacophonous babble that allegorically echoes the biblical story from which the work takes its title. What the seven videos have in common - beyond their reflection on narcissism and their deliberate choice of ambiguously-gendered stars - is that each evokes the primary building blocks of language. Together, the videos bang a millennial baby talk out of a series of dissonant beats, a baby talk that approaches sheer pandemonium. A small fragment appropriated from Madonna's song 'Papa Don't Preach,' has her moaning "Pa – Pa – Pa – Pa – Pa – Pa..." Another video has Freddie Mercury gabbling "Ma – Ma – Ma – Ma – Ma – Ma..." Elsewhere, George Michael whimpers "Me – Me – Me – Me – Me – Me..." while Grace Jones insists 'No – No – No – No – No – No – No – No...' The bodies of the performers are frozen in language on each flickering screen – constantly emerging and disintegrating as they articulate – both automaton-like in their circular trances and at the same time peculiarly organic in their twitches and jerks. Each contraction of a muscle, gesticulation of a hand, blink of an eyelid, is repeated hypnotically over and over again as the loops run.

In its staging of primal language as always already tainted, the *Babel Series* alludes poignantly to the challenges facing subject formation in a world in which children often learn their first words by watching television or singing along to pop songs. The installation implies that the entry of the subject into language is inevitably inflected through the global media, restaging concrete poetry such that the utopian aspirations of earlier artists to universal language are jarringly displaced by the infernal universality of the media industry. The resulting discordant environment owes as much to the new poetics of Dada, Futurism and the Soviet avant-garde as it does to Andy Warhol and MTV.