

# CANDICE BREITZ

## deconstructing the massmedia matrix

Candice Breitz, *Diorama*, 2002. Museum of Modern Art Oxford installation, 2003



Candice Breitz works with projections and television monitors. Of the two approaches it is the latter that possesses distinctive sculptural qualities due to the fact that the viewer can move around them in whatever fashion they wish. Breitz's actual video content is determinedly nonlinear and the freedom of movement her monitor installations afford adds a second layer of nonlinearity. *Diorama*, 2002, for example, consists of short video snippets that are played simultaneously creating total cacophony. One's experience of this chaos is both one of fascination with the complexity of its structure and a realization that the artist is providing a significantly creative deconstruction of the stereotyped ideology found in the average soap opera (in this case *Dallas*).

From a sculptural point of view one might also draw a parallel between the box-like shape of the television monitors in Breitz's installations and the objects created by minimalist sculptors of the 1960s and 70s. Like the minimalist sculptors she wants to create an intimate relationship between the viewer and the work of art. But her approach is more suc-



cessful than that of Minimal Art because she does not apply the Platonic purism of Euclidean geometry. The splintered narratives that appear on the screens reflect a deconstruction of Euclidean space evident in the work of Sol LeWitt but instead of geometry we are confronted with a deconstructed version of the constant stream of unconsciousness that assaults us on our television screens. The familiarity of the content means that Breitz's work creates a relationship between the viewer and the sculptural configuration. But it also creates a confrontation because she cuts the filmic fabric of celebrity culture to pieces. In Diorama the main effect of this radical surgery is to create a cacophony that amplifies the utter banality of the values projected by a significant percentage of the American culture industry.



The 51st Venice Biennale, 2005, commissioned a work from Breitz and she created the video diptych *Father*, 2005, and *Mother*, 2005. These were exhibited in totally blacked out rooms conjoined by light and sound trapping doors. Each piece consisted of six wall-embedded monitors in a sculptural semi-circular array. In each work Breitz took six films that dealt with issues concerning mother or fatherhood and extracted scenes in which the principal actor makes significant statements to camera. Accordingly, in each case we are confronted with six major female and male actors, and to intensify the aesthetic effect Breitz blacked out the

background leaving only the actor and, if necessary, a significant prop (e.g. a wine glass in the case of Diane Keaton and a beer bottle in the case of Harvey Keitel). The clips are short, sometimes so very short that the loop becomes obsessively repetitive: ‘God damn her ... God damn her ... God damn her ...’ (Dustin Hoffman).

The overall effect is to offer the viewer a new perspective on film. We do not usually watch six films simultaneously. In addition, Breitz takes us out of the narrative stream of any of the films (and the concomitant suspension of disbelief) giving us



TOP Becoming (Jennifer) BOTTOM Becoming (Cameron), 2003. In Becoming Breitz extracts filmic segments in which a Hollywood star speaks to camera. Breitz films herself mimicing the soliloquy and juxtaposes the two versions. This video Karaoke both foregrounds the process of identification and the loss of self that entails while simultaneously displaying that it is possible to interact with media in a constructionist manner adding value to the appropriated footage by means of processes similar to sampling and remixing in contemporary popular music.



instead an opportunity for a cross-genre comparison. There is an intentionally analytical, semiotic empiricism to her work. We see for example the similarities across the array of films, sometimes to comic effect when each of the six actors appears to be speaking virtually the same line. Typical generic statements include 'I can't take any more of this', 'your mommy has gone away', 'you're marrying *who?*', 'haven't I been a good mother?' etc. Individually they are not especially significant, but when we see an array of a half a dozen screens presenting material from different films uttering similar sentiments via similar phraseology the viewer's response becomes more complex and self-reflexive than when transfixed by a single narrative.

The reaction of the audience was interesting, and as I sat in these works for a quite a while I am able to report that it was probably the most popular piece on exhibition as well as being intellectually, technically and aesthetically sophisticated. There were bursts of laughter, but some of segments provoked thoughtful silences reinforcing the generality of the human situations being treated in these filmic snippets. Which leads to another level of her work: the fact that this method enables Breitz to synthesise several screenplays creates a formidable reflection of contemporary values that is not limited to America alone, but to contemporary Western culture in general. The viewer is invited to consider to what extent such media art is transmitting moral propaganda, and to what extent it provides constructive, theatrical reflection on contemporary circumstances. *Mother* and *Father* provide us with a meta-semiotic experiment which, in an archeologi-

cal-anthropological fashion, avoids any definitive stance on the data it presents; yet, because of its sophisticated presentation, it guides the viewer towards more complex understandings of mass media and mass culture.