

*Truth, Lies & Videotape: Constructed Identity in Video Art* (2015)

Images and objects are closely aligned to identity, reflecting who we are, how we live, and what we believe. They are, in a sense, a sort of mirror image. Even so, the veracity of images and objects has been questioned, despised, loved, and analyzed. Their relationship to the real world has been examined and debated for millennia, the very idea that images and objects could represent reality or reveal truths has long been questioned. Today, art experts and lay people alike with this issue with very little consensus. One of the earliest debates on the subject comes from Plato who believed that art making was highly suspect. He felt that the artist would do just as well holding up a mirror to reflect the surrounding universe, “There are many ways, none quicker than that of turning a mirror round and round – you would soon enough make the sun and the heavens, the earth and yourself, and all the other things, in the mirror. But they would be appearances only.”<sup>1</sup> Plato, of course, was speaking from a very different time and place, it is difficult to imagine how he would feel about photography or video, art forms that seem to behave much like a mirror. More recently, Susan Sontag wrote, “In teaching us a new visual code, photographs alter and enlarge our notions of what is worth looking at and what we have a right to observe. They are a grammar and, even more importantly, an ethics of seeing.”<sup>2</sup> These disparate ideas offer a keen backdrop against which to consider the role of video art in the imitative arts. Artists have used the medium much like the other arts: as thoughtful and provocative cultural critique and consciousness-raising. In this paper I am going to consider three examples of video art dealing specifically with identity. Each presents an interplay of truth and lies that, when looked at critically, exposes greater truths of how our identity and the identity of others is constructed. Beginning with Charles and Ray

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<sup>1</sup> Plato, *The Dialogues of Plato*. Translated by Benjamin Jowett. 3rd Ed. Oxford University Press. London, England. 1892. Page 34.

<sup>2</sup> Sontag, Susan. *On Photography*. In *Plato's Cave*. Picador Publishing. New York, NY. 1977. Page 3.

Eames's *Glimpses of the USA*, an installation at the 1959 Moscow World Fair, we will see the powerful role images can play in stealthily demonstrating a nationalistic and hegemonic perspective. In *Zidane: A 21st Century Portrait* (2006) Philippe Parreno and Douglas underscore the ways in which mass media constructs celebrity in popular culture. And, lastly, in Candice Breitz's biographical work *Factum* (2010), we get an intimate look at the unique experience of twins. *Factum* affirms the complexity of cultural, familial, and individual forces at work in the construction of a person's identity. Each of these examples explores how adeptly video art can be used to show how identity is constructed by hegemonic forces, self-perception, and the video medium itself. We see how video has been utilized to examine ourselves not only as the subject but also as the material of art.

In the early days of video art, Rosalind Krauss asserted that the medium was narcissistic. Krauss examines various works of video art where artists perform with themselves, merge with themselves, talk to themselves.<sup>3</sup> In this pattern, Krauss sees a commentary on the concept of mirror-reflection, which she believes establishes a rift between video art and other art forms. She sees painting, sculpture, and film as having particular physical qualities, separate from the artists themselves, that reflect the intentions of the artist. There is the clarity of an object with a subject; the reflexive quality is in the separateness of object and subject. On the other hand, according to Krauss, video art fuses the categories of object and subject abolishing the separateness. The object is merely an appendage, all that remains is the psychological experience, focused on the self. Krauss says, "It is the condition of someone who has, in Freud's words, 'abandoned the investment of objects with libido and transformed object-libido into ego-libido.' And that is the specific

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<sup>3</sup> Krauss, Rosalind. *Perpetual Inventory. Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism*. The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA. 2010. Pages 3-18.

condition of narcissism.”<sup>4</sup> Further exploring video art through the lens of psychoanalysis, Krauss uses the example of analysis itself. In analysis a patient is allowed to discover their constructed self and, in doing so, find their true self. Through reflexiveness the patient reveals a truer notion of themselves. In the videos I have chosen to present, we will discover that identity is far more complex than Krauss leads us to believe. A great deal more is taken into the camera’s lens than the artists themselves. From the beginning video art has also been turned outward to look at the other, speak to the other, and analyze the other. Artist, subject, audience, and even the State all take a turn on the analyst’s couch where both truths and lies are revealed.

*Glimpses of the USA* was not made for ourselves but for the other, in this case the cold war enemies of America, the people of the Soviet Union. The video installation was shown at the American National Exhibition in Moscow in 1959. The purpose of the exhibition according to Marilyn Kushner was, “to implement the US-USSR cultural exchange agreement signed in 1958. The exchange was meant to be a ‘major step toward building better relationships and improved understanding.’ This, however, tells only part of the story. The exhibition was also a tool of cultural diplomacy against the Soviet communist regime.”<sup>5</sup> In other words it was designed to construct an American national identity with the goal of seducing the Soviet people into desiring a democratic and capitalist way of life. The architecture of the exhibit was awe inspiring: seven twenty-by-thirty-foot screens displaying more than 2,200 still and moving images were suspended within a vast (250 feet in diameter) geodesic dome designed by Buckminster Fuller. The images were combined into seven separate film reels and projected simultaneously through seven interlocked

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Kushner, Marilyn S. *Exhibiting Art at the American National Exhibition in Moscow, 1959: Domestic Politics and Cultural Diplomacy*. MIT Press, Cambridge MA. *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Winter 2002, Vol. 4, No. 1. Page 6.

projectors.<sup>6</sup> Although *Glimpses* was actually film made in the very early days of video, the arrangement of the multiple TV-shaped screens in the exhibit remarkably foresees the impact of television and video art installation. However spectacular the presentation, it is the images



*Glimpses of the USA* The American National Exhibition in Moscow (1959)

themselves that bear witness to the message of sameness and difference. The collaged images read as art spectacle but play as propaganda. According to Plato, “If anyone at all is to have the privilege of lying, the rulers of the State should be the persons; and they, in dealings either with enemies or with their own citizens, may be allowed to lie for the public good.”<sup>7</sup> Whether or not this is for the public good is questionable. It is likely that the images reflect more than an idealized utopia aimed

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<sup>6</sup> Colomina, Beatriz. *Enclosed by Images: The Eameses' Multiscreen Architecture. Art of Projection*. Hatje Cantz Verlag, Ostfildern, Germany. 2009. Page 9.

<sup>7</sup> *The Dialogues of Plato*. Page 20.

at seducing the enemy. It may also genuinely reveal the blindness of many Americans in regards to the nation's complex social and economic reality.

The first image we see is the stars, constellations and nebulae of the night sky - the same seen by both Americans and Soviets, not unlike the glittering city lights as they would appear from the skies over U.S. and Russian cities. Next we see landscapes, a variety of natural environments that could easily be found in either country. "But people live on this land and as in Russia they are drawn into towns and cities, here is something of the way they live,"<sup>8</sup> the narrator says. Moving in closer, we see aerial images of suburbia; we see brightly colored swimming pools in people's back yards. The camera then turns its eye to urban areas where we see huge, clean, modern cities with beautifully landscaped parks and gardens. Eventually the video shifts from the general to the more specific: people come into view, the morning paper arrives, men are off to work, kissing and waving goodbye, and children head to school. There are buses, trains, automobiles, highways and bridges. We are shown the hustle and bustle of the city. We get a glimpse of the faces of American people: men, women, white, black. We see the workers and children come home at the end of a long day. We see them kissing each other good night, we see Forget-me-not flowers. Yet, this mirror is carefully placed. The image it reflects is only a part of the reality as it constructs a well-crafted and politicized appearance of life in the United States. Very much in the way a photograph straddles a line between fact and fiction so does the Eames's presentation. Sontag writes, "Photographs are valued because they give information. They tell one what there is; they make an inventory. But in the situations in which most people use photographs, their value as information is of the same order as fiction."<sup>9</sup> What we do not see is poverty. There are no images of America's

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<sup>8</sup> *Glimpses of the U.S.A.* [excerpt]. 1959. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ob0aSyDUK4A>. Web. 22 November 2014.

<sup>9</sup> *On Photography. In Plato's Cave.* Page22.

poor – rural or urban. There are no images of racial inequality, rock and roll, or crime. There are no images of art. No images of the McCarthy hearings. These brief ‘glimpses’ construct a perception of American identity that includes only wealth, abundance, and love. It is a seductive partial truth believable not only to the others but also to many of our own.

Whereas *Glimpses of the USA* purposefully constructs identity through propaganda, *Zidane: A 21st Century Portrait* (2006) exposes the power of mass media to construct celebrity. Zinedine Zidane is one of the most famous soccer players in history. He was playing for Real Madrid in 2005 when Philippe Parreno and Douglas Gordon made their video art documentary. Seventeen different cameras follow Zidane for the duration of soccer match. In an interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist, Parreno explains, “The entire project was to reflect on the way television events produce reality.”<sup>10</sup> In contrast to a television broadcast that would likely focus on the movement of the ball, the action of the players, the crowd, and the scoreboard, here we are almost exclusively focused on Zidane himself. Soccer is not the subject of the film, Zidane is, and all the action is made to appear to revolve around him alone. R. G. Collingwood says, “What the artist produces is not a bed or a battle or a hero or a villain, but an object sui generis, to be judged not by the standards by which these things are judged, but by a standard peculiar to itself.”<sup>11</sup> Parreno and Douglas appear to have capitalized on this very notion. The person, Zidane, is rendered an instantiation of the sport of soccer and also of celebrity. His identity is not presented as a soccer player who is part of a team, but as the central force of the game, all else is incidental. The sense of linear time is lost in the narrowness of the focus. Filmed from numerous angles and points of view, we see Zidane run, fall, and sweat. We see his facial expressions and read his emotions.

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<sup>10</sup> Obrist, Hans Ulrich. *Philippe Parreno*. Verlag der Buchhandlung Walter Konig. Cologne, Germany. 2008. Page 116.

<sup>11</sup> Collingwood, R. G. *Plato's Philosophy of Art. Mind, New Series. Vol. 34, No. 134. Oxford University Press. London, England. 1925.* Page 159.

Douglas Gordon talks about the film being a portrait, “In art history if you make a portrait it is not a model, it is a subject. The Mona Lisa is not a model, she is a subject. The puzzle is to work out who is who. And in *Zidane* the definition isn’t very clear. It’s a mixture between sport, television, cinema, and art.”<sup>12</sup> Had this video been commissioned by Zidane, it would be an excellent example of the narcissism that Krauss speaks of. But because it is made by outsiders looking in, the film underscores the face of constructed celebrity. It looks like reality but it is clearly only one version



*Zidane: A 21st Century Portrait* (2006). Philippe Parreno and Douglas Gordon

of reality (17 versions of reality); it is a constructed reality. Approximately half way into the video, it cuts to clips of news stories, images of the universe, a video game, casualties of war. Holding up a picture of a young girl, a television newscaster says, “... a human face.” Then suddenly we are back to Zidane.<sup>13</sup> Is this the mirror up to which we are holding Zidane? Is it a commentary on the absurdity of one’s devotion to sports when the world is in turmoil? Is it a question of celebrity

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<sup>12</sup> Philippe Parreno. Page 120.

<sup>13</sup> *Zidane: A 21st Century Portrait* (2006). [https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player\\_embedded&v=fTuw1BhGPY0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=fTuw1BhGPY0).

and who we value as models and heroes? Near the end of the game a scuffle breaks out, a penalty is drawn and Zidane leaves the field and the game. With their subject gone, the camera pans to the sky and the video ends. Not unlike the way *Glimpses of the USA* shows the ability of the moving image to construct a calculated perception of national identity, *Zidane* shows how adeptly the media can privilege a single person and construct an idealized identity for that person outside of the conditions of reality. “The omnipresence of cameras persuasively suggests that time consists of interesting events, events worth photographing,”<sup>14</sup> Writes Sontag. The ubiquity of cameras seems most appropriate for upholding the power of the “omnipresence” of television cameras, as well as the “omnipresence” of Parreno’s and Douglas’s cameras, to create celebrity by suggesting that an event – or a particular person – is worth looking at.

Candice Breitz, in her video installation *Factum*, turns away from images of national identity and celebrity to focus on a more intimate identity: one that is formed in the context of family and community. However, her work also addresses potent issues of sameness and difference. The title, *Factum*, is borrowed from two Rauschenberg paintings of the same name. The paintings, which are very similar to each other, are in different collections: one in New York, the other in Los Angeles.<sup>15</sup> There is a reference, thus, to twins separated at birth. In an interview with writer/curator Rosemary Heather, Breitz notes, “My *Factum* portraits raise similar questions in relation to subject formation. Like Rauschenberg's paintings, identical twins are at first glance overwhelmingly similar, but the more time you spend with them, the more apparent the differences - subtle and dramatic - become. Despite all the forces of sameness that press in on us, and there are many, the idiosyncrasy of inner life nevertheless prevails.”<sup>16</sup> Breitz interviewed seven pairs of

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<sup>14</sup> *On Photography. In Plato's Cave. Page 11.*

<sup>15</sup> Heather, Rosemary. *Candice Breitz talks to Rosemary Heather.* Army of YouTube: Rosemary heather's Blog. 7/7/2011. Page 8.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*



twins and one set of triplets. Each individual pair/set are dressed the same and interviewed in the same setting, accentuating the fact that they are twins and rendering them in appearance, almost indistinguishable. But, she interviews them separately and displays the edited interviews as diptychs (and one triptych) on the gallery wall. The twins' stories – auto/biographies – overlap, corroborate, and differentiate their experiences. In Book X of *The Republic* Socrates poses the question, “Which is the art of painting designed to be – an imitation of things as they are, or as they appear – of appearance or reality?”<sup>17</sup> The inherent nature of video allows Breitz to present



*Factum Tremblay* (2009) Candice Breitz

her subjects as they appear and, through juxtaposition, who they really are in the privacy of their individual lives. They are, at the same time, mirrors and not-mirrors of each other. We discover that beyond their identity as twins they have an identity as individuals, and yet another identity ascribed to them by Breitz's video. In a sense Breitz is playing the role of analyst, where in the

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<sup>17</sup> *The Dialogues of Plato*. Page 35.

course of the interviews, the subjects discover their constructed selves and their true selves. Breitz says, “*Factum* is my attempt to find a jagged way to look at how a mass of fragments comes together to make up a particular life or, actually, a particular pair of lives.”<sup>18</sup> Often, the subjects appear in the diptych presentation to be having a conversation with one another. At points, one interview pauses, like a freeze frame, while the other speaks. Sometimes one interview disappears and we are focused on the dialogue of only one twin. We often hear about the same life events but recounted through each individual’s perception. The interviews are long but very dynamic and engaging. “The photograph,” writes Andre Bazin, “allows us to admire in reproduction something that our eyes alone could not have taught us to love.”<sup>19</sup> Through *Factum* we (and the twins) are allowed to see much more deeply into the unique experience of these two people who are usually seen as one. Sontag may perhaps see Breitz’s video as a more aggressive intervention, “To photograph people is to violate them, by seeing them as they never see themselves, by having knowledge of them they can never have.”<sup>20</sup> Whether through love or violation the end result is knowledge and through knowledge: transformation and liberation. We are presented an opportunity to comprehend the subtleties of individual identity even in two deeply intertwined lives. Artist and journalist Chris Kraus says of Breitz’s 2009 exhibition in Toronto, “Seen in the context of the exhibition’s thoughtful selection of installations produced over a decade, this piece helps underscore Breitz’s primary concern: a questioning of how, in relation to others, the subject is formed.”<sup>21</sup> The video art medium is instrumental in Breitz’s success.

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<sup>18</sup> *Candice Breitz talks to Rosemary Heather*. Page 6.

<sup>19</sup> Bazin, Andre. Gray, Hugh. *The Ontology of the Photographic Image*. Film Quarterly Vol. 13, No. 4. University of California Press. 1960. Page 9.

<sup>20</sup> *On Photography*. In *Plato’s Cave*. Page 14.

<sup>21</sup> Kraus, Chris. Candice Breitz. *Artforum international* (Dec 2009): 244-245. Proquest. 2009. *Factum Tremblay* (2009) Candice Breitz.

Video technology had a profound effect on art. Unlike photography or film it offered a previously unknown level of immediacy, accessibility, and transportability. It has a particular relationship to Television and mass media, to the everyday and to domestic life. It is similar to photography but, as a moving image, somehow radiates an even greater aura of truthful document. Although initially video was often used as a mirror of the artist in the context of their own practice, ultimately artists turned the camera outward to reflect and comment on the world around them. This point of view reveals much about our identity and the ways in which identity is formed by the objects and images that we encounter. Framing, editing, and juxtaposing is the basis of a time-worn recipe that ensures a calculated perspective and impact. Identity through the lens of video art is perhaps more a hall of mirrors than a mirror. Nonetheless, the discrepancies - what is included and excluded - makes room for critical analysis. Even in the extreme, where deception is the goal, the glaring omissions speak loudly and have the potential to awaken us and raise our consciousness. *Glimpses of the U.S.A.*, *Zidane* and *Factum* are each a mix of lies and truth. Though their goal may have been predetermined, they adeptly speak to our experience of the world from the macro to the micro. They allow us, through their sometimes broad, sometimes banal and narrow focus, to see the truth in lies and the lies in truth.

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