

Dani Marti
One breath below consciousness

24 July – 23 August 2008



BRENSPACE



Andrea, greeted by a pubescent smile, 2007
4:3 single channel video
10'54"

Few people would admit this, but looking at art is a lot like cruising for casual sex (and not just because both tend to happen on the weekend). A common pact is signed the moment we enter a given space – usually physical, increasingly virtual – to see the goods on show. The tantalising prospect is to have our fancies tickled there and then, to be drawn into the lurid surface-world before us, to be speaking through appearance. A scan up and down the body generally suffices before we move on to the next object in the line-up. Occasionally, a broader dialogue is sparked, a yearning to spend more time with what's before us – sometimes to seek out the other's ideas, more often due to the dazzle of display. If we're really conscientious, we'll find out the prospect's name and the year of its production (who knows, we may even remember those details a few days down the track). Most often of all, though, we stagger out disappointed, deflated in the wrong way, nonetheless urging ourselves to forge on in the hope of having the right kind of encounter.

The comparison between art and the casual fuck is more than froth and bubbles. Beneath its superficiality lie some deeply pressing concerns. Are only surface intimacies possible through the brevity of an encounter? How believable is the representation of another when determined by carefully controlled appearances, or when perpetually mediated by images on a screen or in our minds? In short, how can we transform an object into a subject when practically all our relations with other people and other things are threatened or bound by artifice, by what the French writer-provocateur Guy Debord called the conditions of the spectacle?

These are not, of course, conditions specific to cruising art works or other people. They inform the main ways in which we encounter the lives of others these days: through the silver-screen cult of celebrity or the small-screen haven of the chatroom, the carefully scripted CV or the innumerable diaristic videos uploaded to Youtube or the blogosphere. Who we are must, it seems, be made as transparent as possible, reduced to a surface of what we do or how we appear to others. Life itself becomes a tool for quantification and rationalisation much like any other data, a sculpture judiciously crafted in the editing suite, an image to be read at a glance as though biography were pornography. In the process, the once-exhausted format of the portrait regains its social significance, as crucial for dealing with others in the early twenty-first century as it was in the fifteenth.

This is the reality framing some of the most fascinating attempts at portraiture in recent years. If art and the self have increasingly become superficial, casual affairs that

intersect in the ubiquity and transparency of the portrait, then what might a different kind of contemporary portrait look like? What might it reveal that we don't already know? For artists such as Douglas Gordon, Philippe Parreno or Dani Marti, the answer lies in creating art that does not try to capture the subject within a portrait – after all, to capture is to contain, to quantify, to make transparent once again. Rather, their works have sought to release a sense of the subject despite the limitations of portraiture and even, to an extent, despite the subject's own reluctance to be revealed.

For each of these artists, the key to this different kind of portraiture is gesture. For Gordon and Parreno's subject, the French footballer Zinedine Zidane, a sense of the self emerges through the way Zidane taps his boots across the football pitch, or wipes the sweat from his brow, or lets his fingers dance in anticipation of the football. Each unconscious tic ever-so-slightly ruptures the cool or aggressive demeanour that Zidane presents across his face for the benefit of the cameras and the viewers of the game.

Marti's subjects are invariably less renowned, but no less open to or opened by gesture. In Marti's video loops, usually named after the people projected through them, these gestures are both incredibly intimate and exceptionally mundane: the way that Andrea's fingers glide across a computer keyboard while her eyes never leave the screen, or her adolescent flick of hair that grazes her left eye; the slowness with which David's eyelids slide shut, or how he doesn't quite grip the torn paper cup in his hands, as he struggles between consciousness and one breath below it; the twitches of the man's mouth in the video *Braveheart* as he grapples with the painstaking process of soldering, or his alternately sharp and shallow intakes of breath as he plays the flute or the piccolo. Each gesture momentarily disrupts the person's appearance – what they're saying, what they're doing, how they ordinarily look – to bring something hidden to the foreground, something uncontrollable to the surface, before it recedes once more.

Similar kinds of gestures emerge in Marti's woven works as well, although by slightly different means. Despite their titles, these quasi-painterly quasi-sculptural bindings are not representations of people; they are instead markers of process ruptured briefly by gestures in their making. These are Marti's own gestures of frustration and passion as he tightens the weave and rips the cord into place, a response both to his memory of the subjects as he binds his materials together and the painstaking process of binding itself. Weaves buckle

and cords fray partially in their rubbing, slightly stripping the sheathed surface of the ropes to reveal a glint of something underneath. Many of these ropes have already been distressed before their tethering, dragged behind a car across the ground, over concrete, grazing dirt, so as to soil the ropes' appearances, to test their limits and impart small incisions through their façades. What is inside – inside the cords, inside the binding process, beneath a binding's surface – leaches out in irrepressible ways, hinting at something more. Something that emerges in the meeting between Marti's making and his subjects made present through memory: a glint through the weaves that catches the light and the eye; a fraying that frazzles the cords' crispy clean plastic; a tension that cannot be captured and yet somehow is released.

A moment of time, a gestural flick, a brief rupture in perception: these are the keys to the contemporary portrait, a genre that is neither figurative nor abstract, that seeks neither to capture nor contain its subject, and so is not really a portrait in any traditional sense. What these momentary ruptures reveal is not a public or a private self: that dualism has largely disappeared in our world of casual cruising, of the webcam, the blogspot and perpetually being on show. What they hint at is a more contemporary realm of the self that we may not even know exists, yet which is released and revealed through tics, gestures and uncontrollable responses. These are portraits of the gestural unconscious, of one's habits and movements that persist in our daily relations and in the memory of other bodies, other names, other entities. The gesture exists but cannot really be understood. It can be made apparent, yet resists quantification and rationalisation as something that can be known. It pricks the façades of the spectacle. It is a sense of the subject that lurks below the conscious, intimate and lingering.

Anthony Gardner is an arts writer, editor and lecturer based in Melbourne. He recently completed his PhD at the Centre for Contemporary Art and Politics, UNSW, examining critiques of democracy in Postsocialist art from Europe. Some of his recent texts can be found in *Art and Australia*, *A Prior*, *Artforum* and *Reading Room*. He is an editorial advisory board member of *un Magazine* and *Broadsheet*, and an advisor to the *South Project*.



One breath below consciousness, 2008 (detail)
white polyester, white nylon and soil
240 x 200 x 10 cm



Braveheart, 2007
16:9 single channel video
17'50"



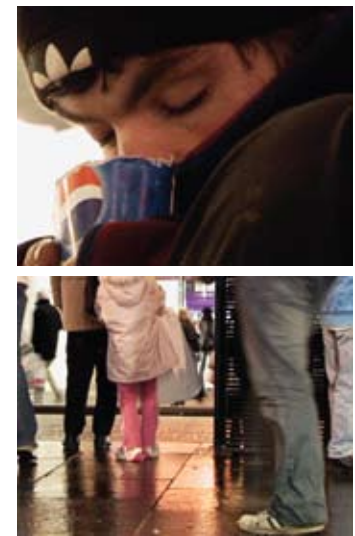
The secret life of tweens, 2008
nylon, polyester and leather on wood
195 x 205 x 6 cm



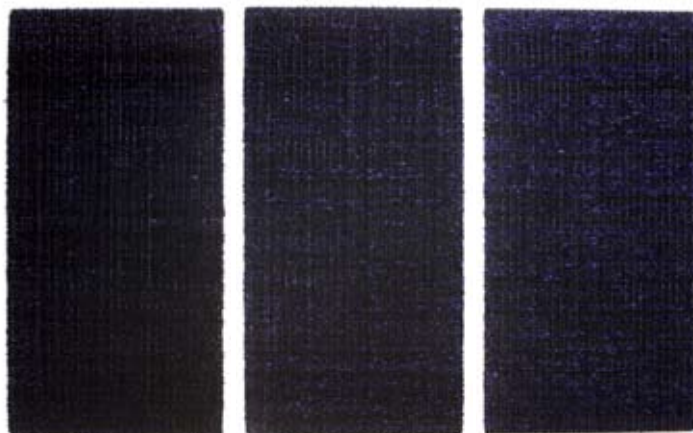
Braveheart, take 4, 2007
polyester, nylon and leather on wood
145 x 200 x 14 cm



The pleasure chest, 2007
second-hand beaded necklaces and Spanish rosary beads
collected between 2000 and 2003, tubular mesh used for
mussel farming
255 x 130 x 8 cm



David, 2007
4:3 single channel video
8'29"
commissioned by Glasgow International 2008
sound arrangement by Diana Simpson



Shadow after shadow (portrait of the artist's mother at the age of 73), take 2, 2007

polyester, nylon, knitting yarn and stainless steel ball chains on wood

3 parts, 117 x 232 x 5 cm each

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