

Hillary Dempster

Between the Screen and Dreams
Searching For Truth Through Video Art

Making art is my struggle to find my identity and place in the world. By exploring this through a forum as public as art, I want to open up the conversation about what makes us who we are. I am interested in our presentation of self, our interactions with others, and the role our past has in determining our current selves.

My work has only recently provided a means of sharing a part of me that I consider very private. By sharing part of myself through video art, I hope to make up for the distance I place between myself and others in my personal life, and inspire dialogue about how we develop a sense of self, relate to other people, and experience memories of this as we age.

Nostalgia is a word made up from two Greek words. Nostos, which is translated to “returning home” and algos, which means pain or longing. My work has been a process of embracing nostalgia to free myself from the past. I can now consider my past as an entity that is part of my identity but does not define me. To investigate the feeling of nostalgia, I filmed a Polaroid picture being snapped of me while I held a sign that read, “I want to remember this moment.” In the film, I proceeded to walk up to the camera and burn the photo. The immediate destruction of the Polaroid, moments after it is taken, mirrors the ephemeral quality of video. The desire to hang on to our past through images that may not fully reflect the “truth” of that past is sometimes detrimental to the development of self. If I could destroy all photos of my past, would my memory suffice? Would I remember the photos, or the actual moment?

Issues of the public and private have influenced the presentation and content of my work. Engaging an audience was a priority, but my guarded personality prevented me from putting self-expression into my work. The culminating senior work utilizes very private, personal elements to explore a universal human experience. I have accepted creating and showing my art as part of my identity, even if it makes me more vulnerable to my audience.

Though he is famous for his controversial work, I looked to Vito Acconci’s struggle to engage his audience while determining an autonomous self in his video work. The extent to which he reveals himself to his audience and is willing to use his body to navigate through these issues is both terrifying and appealing to me. In “Face Off”, Acconci plays an audio tape of intimate details about his life and as he sits and listens to it, he starts yelling over top of the more embarrassing secrets.¹ This desire to reveal for an audience and hide from them simultaneously is one that I am struggling with currently. Even though the secrets played on the tape are specific to his life, the feeling of wanting to conceal our past indiscretions is a universally understood emotion. In

¹ Rush, Michael. *Video art*. (New York: Thames and Hudson Ltd., 2003.) p. 30

“Scenes from this Side of Camp”, Acconci explored his role as artist/performer further, the audio spoken over this installation consisted of phrases between the sounds of tap dancing “I’d want to perform here whether you liked it or not... It gives me a stance; let’s say “a sense of who I am... I have to face up to what I am... Show myself to you... That’s what you want...”² Though his work is too confrontational at times for me, it has provoked my interest in being a public “performer” as an artist, and private and guarded in my personal life.

I am interested in installation art and bringing artwork into the public sphere to include people outside of the art community. I see the gallery as problematic, specifically on our campus as it is not a well known venue and very few people feel comfortable entering. However, I do not want to write the gallery off; there are ways of making an audience feel welcome once they are within a gallery.

I created three pieces that directly dealt with making art more visible on campus and inclusive of a wider, more participatory audience. I built a wall and placed it in a high traffic area on campus. One side featured an iconographic image of Bob Ross put together by “puzzle pieces” I left around campus, and a message directly inviting students to the opening of the show. On the other side of the wall, I projected a video I made of all the SMP students making their work to make the actual creation of the art more visible to the rest of the campus.

My third piece in this project attempted to make visitors more comfortable once they were within the gallery. By inviting gallery visitors to contribute to a piece on the wall I hoped to make them feel more welcome once they were within the gallery. This work was important in developing how I wanted to reach my audience and who that audience should be.

Throughout all my work, I have used collage and appropriated or “found” images. The appeal of the found image has a postmodernist rationale behind it, as I feel that “imagery has been over determined...the world has already been glutted with pictures.”³ This applies to my feelings on consumer culture as well, as a teenager I decorated my room with objects I found on the street, and to this day, I prefer to shop in antique and secondhand stores. This aspect of my personality was integrated into my artwork through the collaging of found imagery, but offered very little of my own emotion or personal experience in the resulting videos. Instead, I focused on larger societal issues, to both keep my art at a safe distance, and to justify to myself the fact that I was making art with a greater cause, without being a “masturbatory” artist.

² Linker, Kate. *Vito Acconci*. (New York: Rizoli International Publications, Inc., 1994.) p. 58

³ Wells, Liz. *The Photography Reader*. (New York: Routledge, 2003.) p. 172

“It takes a peculiar mode of consciousness to be captivated by film. One needs a high degree of subjectivity and a basically schizoid memory.”⁴ Looking to early surrealist films and gauging how the artist distinguishes between reality and imagination helped me determine visual cues in my own work. The collage aesthetic is crucial in these early surrealist films, which enhances the feeling of dreaming or a memory, something I use in my work as well.

“One may well consider the cinema a waking dream, one that continues to haunt or possess us, even as we might possess and consume it.”⁵ In *dream*, I explored the state of dreaming in relation to experiencing moving images on a screen. I reconstructed a dream by using four computers to cue up surreal imagery from the internet. In one take, I filmed a “dream” with sequences that ventured between the feeling of being confined and utter freedom. I filmed the imagery on the computer monitors so I was intrinsically comparing the nature of looking at a computer screen and dreaming as altered states of consciousness and reality. As the images were very similar to my own dreams, this piece was more personal and abstract than much of my other work, which tended toward a documentary approach.

Video art employs surrealistic imagery to convey a mood or tone separate from the representational forms of feature films or documentaries. When I create my video pieces, I want my viewers to experience watching something on screen as a dreamlike consciousness, and when they stop watching, “wake up” from being seduced by the moving image. In the condition of viewing something on screen, our body physically exists in real time, but our mind is elsewhere and not consciously thinking about what we are doing or where we are, much like dreaming.

Pipilotti Rist’s video work employs strange imagery to enhance this dreamlike state and investigate ideas of identity and time. In *Ever Is Overall*, she skips happily down a street in a blue dress and red shoes breaking windows and causing havoc on an urban street. The strange juxtaposition of her reckless activity with her childlike demeanor illustrates an inner desire that many may have to break societal norms and happily act on typically frowned upon impulses. Even stranger still, is her video “I’m not the girl who misses much” where she gyrates wildly while repeatedly singing the title of her video over and over, while the video alternates between being comically sped up and slowed down, before it breaks down into a sequence of dreamlike abstracted images at the end.⁶ These images resonate with my sense of dreaming, which is as though a distorted mirror is being held up to reality. It looks familiar, and is grounded in truth, but something is off.

⁴ Linden, George W. “Film, *Fantasy, and the Extension of Reality*” *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, Vol. 18.3, (University of Illinois Press, 1984.) p. 45

⁵ Iles, Chrissie. *Into the Light: The Projected Image in American Art 1964-1977*. New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2001) p. 71

⁶ Rush, Michael. *Video art*. (New York: Thames and Hudson Ltd., 2003.) 104

For the first time in my life, I was completely alone while studying abroad in London. The time there led me to question my identity more than ever before and begin to think about the many ways I may be perceived and which one was the most “true.” I collaborated with eight other girls to make a time-based piece about *Girls Gone Wild*, which is probably the most well known “real” portrayal of college-age girls. This was one of the first ventures into work exploring social issues and began to touch the surface of examining private acts in the public sphere. My interest in documentary photography and video was central to this project. Making video art increases an artist’s awareness of media and marketing tactics within the television screen. Studying documentary work leads to questions about all representations of truth and reality and this work was created at the crux of my involvement in both.

Continuing my explorations of how women were represented in the media, particularly in the context of “reality” as portrayed on TV, I took sound from news broadcasts, the Jerry Springer show, COPS, and the reality show “Big Brother” specifically searching for clips laden with aggressive language. Juxtaposed with this sound was calm, mundane imagery of female hands performing daily activities, such as brushing teeth, opening doors, and making food. This pairing altered the perception of the visual information, making it seem almost violent at times. Nothing on TV is as it seems, and the “reality” portrayed in the media does not always match up with real experiences. The difference between the life we actually lead and the life we vicariously experience while watching something on screen can alter our perception of the world and lead to impractical expectations about life. Anything that claims to visually document reality is highly problematic, as this assumes that a reality exists in the world that can be shown through visual cues alone.⁷

The exploration of my identity as a college aged female made me start thinking about other things that have shaped who I am today. For a photo series, I explored a difficult event from my past that had a profound effect on how I lived my life. This series utilized Polaroid pictures to document everywhere I went for a day, always photographing upwards, and written descriptions of my thoughts. Seven years before I started the project, I had a much more reckless lifestyle and experienced a brush with death a couple of days after my fifteenth birthday. There were none of the stereotypical events associated with dying, no light at the end of the tunnel, none of my life flashing before my eyes, nothing but nothingness. As enough time has passed and adulthood is looming, I am only now coming to terms with this event and beginning to wrap my head around it. The piece was an effort to convey the anxiety I have about my mortality and my resulting appreciation for every aspect of life. My awareness of my own mortality, from such a young age, has been a driving force in my urge to contribute and make some positive impact with my life and through my work. However, this was the first time I put so much of myself into my art, which made it one of the most intimidating projects to date. There is a need to express the part of myself influenced by this event, but I still need to hide much of my emotions and details about my past.

⁷ Gaines, Jane M. and Renov, Michael. *Collecting Visible Evidence*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999.) p. 2

For another book project, I got even more in depth into my past. I used my experience of my parents divorce to investigate the effect individual relationships within the context of a family unit. Inserting old snapshots and footage from my childhood into a previously existing book of short stories, I explored the nature of secrets and private thoughts. The images hinted at a happy past, but the words revealed a more complex truth. I realized there was something about the book format that lent itself to being able to hide and reveal myself simultaneously, I could keep my secrets safely within the covers and choose who to share them with, if anyone at all. Discovering this helped me begin to merge the personal elements of creating book projects into my video sequences.

There is a truth to the artifacts of the past, and yet it is not a whole truth. They provide a link to the person we once were and provoke nostalgia for the moments that are long gone. I consider dreams and memories as much a remnant of the past as any physical object.

Seven years ago, a few weeks after I got out of the hospital, I bought my first video camera. Though I was not aware of it at the time, this was when my urge to document and affirm my existence began. I recently rediscovered the old footage from that camera. These tapes also happen to be from the time leading up to and during my parent's divorce. The footage documents my life from the age of 15 to 17, friends goofing around or shows that I taped of their bands, and in a few cases, some family events. I had a hard time watching these videos because even though I could remember filming them, I could not reconcile the person I was as a teenager with who I am now. The experience was like dreaming about a past I can barely remember with incredibly accuracy. Though I got to relive many friendships and boyfriends while watching these videos, (some that I did not really care to relive), I also realized that other than my family, the only person in these home movies still in my life is my best friend of ten years, Liz. The only time we have been apart was during my six months in London, which reiterates how much my identity has been defined by our friendship.

Jorge Luis Borges once said, "I dream of a mirror, I see myself with a mask or I see in the mirror somebody who is me, but whom I do not recognize as myself."⁸ Through a video of dreamlike sequences, I explore my current identity in between childhood and adulthood with Liz, who has accompanied me through both phases of life. The scenes imply a dream or a memory, nostalgic by nature but never truly representative of real time passing. We are dressed up as the heteronormative stereotypes a child might have of what a "grown up" woman should be, wearing evening gowns, and over applied makeup; we appear as though we are children who have raided our mother's closet, clearly masquerading as something other than what we are comfortable with. In the video, we look out at our audience, with blank expressions, as though we are staring into a mirror. We are concerned with our appearance, obviously ill at ease in our "grown up" costumes, a metaphor for the anxiety we feel about reaching adulthood when we are still

⁸ Van Bruggen, Coosje. *Bruce Nauman*. New York: Rizzoli International Publications Inc., 1988) p. 196.

very immature in many ways. In the piece, when we are looking into the mirror fixing our hair and makeup, we are trying to reconcile what we see with what we think we are supposed to look like. When we are fixing our hair and makeup while looking into the camera (what looks like looking out at the audience) we are fixing ourselves for the camera, trying to meet a standard that we are not sure we are ready to meet. Footage of us from our teenage years plays behind us, partially obscured, though it has the faintest hint of being from a more carefree time, and more “truthful” than the current selves we are presenting to the camera. At the end of the film, we each remove our makeup, rejecting the mask, while looking into the mirror. We do not completely change out of our costumes, reconciling our childhood past with our future as adults, compromising with a little of both. The footage in the background is arranged in a sequence that goes from conveying a sense of being restrained and limited to eventual freedom and confidence.

For me this piece is as much about being uncomfortable with reaching adulthood, as it is about being uncomfortable with exposing myself in my art. I remove much of my makeup at the end of the piece, but I am still hiding a lot. Liz and I are both art students so the way we are presenting ourselves for scrutiny is both a metaphor for meeting social standards and trying to appeal to our audience.

In real life, we both have the urge in our work and personal lives to capture a moment in time that is fleeting or temporary. This reflects something that has held our friendship together for so long, a different understanding of time, an appreciation for what has past, what will come to pass, and the very little bit of time we have to get the most out of it. I consider the clips from our teenage years as traces of who we are, marks we have left on the past and marks the past has left on us. In its physical form, the tapes are evidence we existed before now, whether we identify with the people we were then or not, our bodies inhabited the spaces filmed and now inhabit a realm of history on the video screen. It is factually represented, though the camera did not record our thoughts, emotions, or experience of those moments, so my memory is left to fill in those blanks. When I watched these tapes, the following days were punctuated by moments of trying to recall whether what I watched was a dream or a memory, before remembering I had watched it on screen.

Makeup and costume has been used in video art pieces to explore these issues before. Bruce Nauman’s *Art Makeup* video pieces worked with the idea of hiding behind a mask, which he further explored in his piece *Consummate Mask of Rock*. In this later piece, “Nauman exposes his vulnerability as an artist, alternately following his impulse to tell the truth, hide behind a mask, and seek out human companionship.” Nauman himself has explained the metaphor of makeup in his video pieces as something that is not making him entirely anonymous, but distorts him in some way by hiding behind it. He describes it as, “Not quite giving, not quite exposing.”⁹

⁹ Van Bruggen, Coosje. *Bruce Nauman*. New York: Rizzoli International Publications Inc., 1988. p. 196

Nam June Paik's work helped me focus on video art, while including aspects of installation. His incorporation of the TV set into his complex installations not only deconstructed the object itself but the overwhelming content of his rapidly paced videos draws attention to the media saturation within the frame.¹⁰ My previous video work that touched on media criticism was presented as a projection, but did not always provoke thought about the act of consuming media images. By displaying my work on a TV screen, I hope to inspire questions about the portrayal of women in the media, and how reality is represented on screen.

The issue of the public and the private is inherent to my decision to reveal more of myself in my artwork. By setting up a private living room in a public art gallery, I simultaneously reference our personal experiences of watching the TV at home and provide a more intimate viewing experience for my audience. I want my audience to feel comfortable and welcome in the gallery, regardless of whether they have any knowledge of art. By providing a place to sit and spend time with the art, I am allowing for more than the customary glance that a lot of video work gets. Unlike other furniture, television sets serve no function other than to be looked at, "it has the uselessness associated with art."¹¹ The feeling of being visible and out in the open while trying to relax on a couch will reference my own anxious feelings of being exposed in my work. At the center of this living room is my video. As I am the subject of scrutiny in many of the shots, I hope to convey a little of that anxiety to my audience as being in the comfort of the private living room setting is a bit disconcerting in a public setting like a gallery. My work is not complete without this audience.

"TV space is fishbowl space."¹² The world within this TV set is my aquarium filled with my past, my dreams, my memories, and my future. It is also my present, and my anxiety about clinging to a past and making the most of my future. It *represents* my identity, but it is not my identity. It is a distorted mirror, honesty and lies, simultaneously. It is my interaction with others, both publicly as an artist and privately as an individual. It is small and intimate and seductive, it is there because of me, but for you.

¹⁰ Hall, Doug and Fifer, Sally Jo. *Illuminating Video: An Essential Guide to Video Art*. (Aperture/BAVC, 1990.) p. 45

¹¹ *ibid*, p. 129

¹² *ibid*, p. 125

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