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This is uncomfortable

by **Arpi Kovacs and Gabrielle Moser**

Present in the video works of Robert Lendrum, Elizabeth Milton and Sheila Poznikoff, Kika Nicoleta, Melissa Pauw and Joshua and Zachary Sandler is the question of what happens when artists attempt to relate to and connect with their subjects through the medium of video. The immediate and provisional answer is that moments of discomfort, disconnection and awkwardness are necessary byproducts of our attempts to relate to one another. Often framed as performative actions that are recorded through the visual language of documentary film, the works in the exhibition set up open-ended scenarios that probe the limits of relational encounters. Employing a variety of modes of address, including marketing survey techniques, “lost pet” style posters, and traditional interview formats, these seven artists encourage, and sometimes provoke, their participants—many of whom are strangers—to speak to one another, and to the camera, in ways that are refreshingly direct. Such tactics necessarily implicate the figure of the artist in a social context and raise questions about the extent to which artists are responsible for managing the relationships they incite and participate in. Whether engaging with strangers or with familiar faces, these works confront moments of vulnerability and embrace discomfort as a necessary part of social interactions.

By explicitly picturing themselves in their interactions with others, the works position the figure of the artist as a necessarily social one and define the video artist’s practice as one which is continually mediated by interactions and relationships with others. Rather than obscuring themselves behind the video camera, these artists make their presence, mediation and provocation in these interactions explicit. By either appearing on screen or including their voice in the soundtrack, the artists present a variety of social interactions that are necessarily fraught and incomplete. In turn, these provoked interactions raise a set of questions: What are the artist’s responsibilities in inciting and managing these

interactions between people? How does this experience translate to viewers watching the final video? And what does it mean to watch these uncomfortable encounters in the space of the gallery, long after they have transpired?

Video art has long been interested in exploring the social role of the artist and the limits of relating to others through the medium. Examples include Andy Warhol’s “Screen Test” series (1963-66), in which visitors to The Factory awkwardly pose in front of a stationary camera; Colin Campbell’s videos of his friends and colleagues acting out improvised scenes in Toronto in the 1970s; and, more recently, Polish artist Artur Zmijewski’s depictions of volatile interactions between strangers that he instigated (such as his 2007 video *Them*). Often these staged encounters are designed to provoke political action, as was the case in Chris Burden’s landmark performance video *Shoot* (1971), which documents the artist being shot in the arm by a friend. Burden’s gesture was a reaction to the Vietnam War and the fact that television viewers were witnessing young men shooting one another as a regular, everyday occurrence.



Robert Lendrum, still from *Dudes*, 2008

While the gestures of Burden and Zmijewski are decidedly aggressive in tone, other artists have pursued strategies of creating uncomfortable situations that provoke subtler feelings that are more intimate and enigmatic. These less volatile emotions, which Sianne Ngai has termed “ugly feelings,” resist definition and refuse to be pinned down by ethical imperatives.¹ Instead, the discomfort felt by the participants in these videos, and later by viewers, is ambiguous, slippery and difficult to manage, again raising questions about the invasion of privacy and the public role of the artist.

Robert Lendrum’s *Impostor* series of videos (2006-09) is an example of this more subtle form of soliciting a response from his participants. Using the structure and language of a market survey, Lendrum asked his friends, family, coworkers and ex-girlfriends to respond to a detailed questionnaire that covered everything from his physical appearance and food preferences to his speech patterns and sexuality. The results of the poll, which were compiled into banal institutional documents like pie charts and graphs, present a qualitative measure of Lendrum that is neither coherent nor particularly believable. This fragmented and rather impersonal mode of data collection was then used as source material by a Dutch actress named Jacqueline van de Geer whom Lendrum hired to play him. Lendrum often appears in his videos alongside van de Geer and assists and negotiates with her to help bring her version of “Rob” to life. This mixture of “raw data,” imitation, and the cameo appearance of the artist himself results in an incomplete representation of the self. The Rob that emerges in the videos is nothing like the real Lendrum and only distantly resembles the data from the survey, casting

doubt on the efficacy of these demographic strategies. In this way, Lendrum’s *Impostor* series serves as a study of how identities are collaboratively and relationally constructed in a fragmented and imperfect fashion. Lendrum’s efforts at self-definition expose the necessity of an existing social structure in which the artist operates as well as the conflicting and uncomfortable ways others perceive us and which allow for the self to exist.

Issues of miscommunication and self-definition also drive the work of Brazilian artist Kika Nicolela, but result in slightly different consequences. The piece *What do you think of me?* was originally created during a 2009 residency in Turku, Finland where the artist asked gallery goers to film her with a video camera and to narrate their impressions of her in Finnish. Their responses range from sincere and cheesy complements to racially charged exoticism. Since the language barrier prevented Nicolela from immediately understanding their comments, she stands before each spectator completely unaware of their perceptions and only able to respond to their smiles, laughter and other outwardly physical gestures. When she returned home, the artist had the comments translated into English and included as subtitles to the footage, which is presented sequentially and seemingly unedited in its final form.

The pauses that punctuate the comments remind viewers of the absurd circumstances that structures the encounter. Yet, despite the superficiality of the interactions, certain comments remain thoughtful and point to the function of language as a primary means of interaction. The voice of a young boy who seems to struggle with operating the camera, for instance, is remarkably earnest in his response: “Brazil



Robert Lendrum, still from *The Chipmunks*, 2006



Kika Nicolela, still from *What do you think of me?*, 2009

is... I don't have much information about Brazil. And I don't know much about their culture because we haven't had it in history class yet." In contrast, the more mature voices are indirect and disconcerting in their tone. One woman seems preoccupied with ascertaining Nicolela's "true nature" through her physical appearance, wondering aloud if "maybe we met in another life." A male voice, on the other hand, seems disinterested in anything but the artist's physical appearance, describing her as dark and warm, "like Brazilian coffee." The documentation cleverly reveals the relationship between language and power, as well as the direct role that language played – and continues to play – in inscribing colonial notions of sexuality and national character.

The relational structure of *What do you think of me?* is derived not only from the interactions between artist and gallery goer, but also through the recording and replaying of these encounters for the viewer of the final work, which reanimates Nicolela's original gesture of vulnerability. Although it is Nicolela who occupies the screen, her voice is rarely heard. Instead, it is those who wield the camera who contribute to the video's defining narrative, and yet we cannot see her subjects as they speak. Nicolela does not employ familiar video tropes such as distortion, repetition, or delays to make the voices more enigmatic, but instead allows the limits of the medium to create an awkward imbalance between those who can speak and those who can only be seen. Though we might wish the speakers could be as visually exposed and vulnerable as the artist, Nicolela's video denies this kind of transparency and is instead open to the sometimes conflicting and uncomfortable social encounters between the artist and her subjects that often go unresolved.

In an attempt to understand the limits of social encounters, some of the tenets of what curator Nicolas Bourriaud in his 1998 book famously termed "relational aesthetics" inevitably appear in several of these video works. According to Bourriaud, the art of the 1990s was characterized by an interest in creating "intersubjective encounters" in which meaning was constituted collectively through social interactions staged in public, rather than individually in the private sphere of consumption.² Although Bourriaud's writings have been much maligned – most notably by critic Claire Bishop³ – these types of interactive gestures and strategies have become commonplace in galleries over the past 15 years. What may distinguish the artists in "This is uncomfortable" from the first wave of relational aesthetics is the understanding that all social relations are inflected by the power imbalances of race, class, gender and age. Their works foreground these disparities asking both their subjects and, later, their viewers, to acknowledge the feelings of discomfort and vulnerability that these imbalances evoke. Rather than creating relational encounters that are documented by video cameras, the artists establish two zones of social encounters: the first inciting moment between the subject(s) and the artist; and the second, a delayed moment of the viewer attempting to relate to the representation of the subject and the artist. Both zones are highly mediated by the presence of the camera. No matter how intimately the artist interacts with the subjects portrayed, the subjects consistently remain "others" who are different from and in many ways unknowable to the artist behind the camera.

By focusing on contexts both in and outside of the gallery space, the artists in "This is uncomfortable" chart



Melissa Pauw, still from *Lost Love*, 2004 – ongoing



Melissa Pauw, still from *Lost Love*, 2004 – ongoing

the confusing intersections of private and public space, demonstrating the types of sensations and experiences that are acceptable in different social scenarios. For Melissa Pauw, public posting and anonymous answering machine messages provide a way to pose questions of vulnerability and intimacy. In her *Lost Love* series (2004-ongoing) she posts “lost pet” style posters across Toronto that invite viewers to call her “hotline” with personal stories of lost love and courage. In turn, the resulting personal stories shared by anonymous strangers are presented in unedited form as the soundtrack to Pauw’s video, which shows her hands as she adheres the posters to various public places.

The recordings range from sincere and candid stories to rude prank calls, but all are completely anonymous. Some calls skirt both of these two categories and in their ambiguity seem more akin to Ngai’s ideas of “ugly feelings.” Ngai defines these feelings as occupying a space between extreme and identifiable emotions, such as rage or abjection, which offer “ambivalent situations of suspended agency” where our emotions no longer neatly link up with social or political action.⁴ One caller’s tongue-in-cheek message seems to exemplify the expression of these ugly feelings that oscillate between irony and sincerity: “... so anyway, I’ve got your love sitting right here, it’s totally cool, it’s not hurt or anything. It’s a great love. Um, so, hopefully I’ll be able to get it back to you at some point or maybe we can share it, you know. See ya.” These feelings are ugly or awkward because they do not allow us to move on, but rather lead us to dwell on issues. In fact, ugly feelings seem to get in the way of one of the purposes of emotion: to relate to other people.

That the object of loss in this instance is in fact outside the realm of tangible objects, and therefore seems irretrievable, makes the gesture of such a posting and its responses seem misguided and even socially abnormal. While the sincerity of the poster is uncertain, the gesture illustrates a form of radical vulnerability that borders on awkwardness. Pauw’s recording of her one-sided interaction with these strangers depicts a public space of anonymity that permits a fractured narrative of earnest confessionals, but also a raucous assemblage of crank calls.

While in some of the works in “This is uncomfortable” the discomfort results from the staging of social interactions, in others it is derived through their mode of presentation. It is no wonder then that the camera is continually used as a tool for explicitly framing the artist’s intentions – his or her insertions, interventions and provocations. The camera is often used to draw attention to its limited capacities, such as the partial view of Pauw’s hands as she tapes up her posters or the clumsy handling of some of Nicolela’s videographer-commentators. Drawing attention to these limits and gaps, the videos question just how close we can get to one another with a camera in hand. Unlike Susan Sontag’s famous concerns in 1977’s *On Photography* that the ubiquity of photography would desensitize us to images of other people’s emotions and sufferings, these videos create persistent feelings of discomfort - a mounting sense that something is not quite right, that not everyone is in on the joke, or that the interviewees’ intended audience and the videos actual viewership do not match up.



Elizabeth Milton and Sheila Poznikoff, still from *St. Theresa's Basement*, 2010.



Elizabeth Milton and Sheila Poznikoff, still from *St. Theresa's Basement*, 2010.

In Elizabeth Milton and Sheila Poznikoff's *St. Theresa's Basement* (2010), a behind-the-scenes documentary of a women's church group as they plan and rehearse their annual drama production, we get the sense that the participant-subjects are already familiar or even intimate with one another. Discomfort in this case does not necessarily arise from the subjects' interactions with one another, but rather through the viewer's access to these seemingly private moments. The artists also underscore the antagonism that can arise in such a close-knit group by asking the women questions or prompting reenactments from off screen. The resulting video is an intimate document that is projected in disjointed fragments over three screens. In this way, the viewers of the work are often unsure of Milton and Poznikoff's relationship with their subjects, or the extent to which the women are aware of where and how the footage of their performances will be presented. It quickly becomes apparent that both artists have gained a level of trust with their participant-subjects that provides a sense of intimacy where broader social norms are not followed.

The two part series *Sierra Blood Diaries (vol. I and II)* (2005-08) by brothers Joshua and Zachary Sandler addresses many of the same notions of relating to one another, but in a more fragmentary manner. Known for making work about their tense family relations which often features their family members as actors, this series by the Sandlers loosely takes the form of a documentary-style interview that traces their younger sister Sierra's relationship with her family. She is introduced first at age 12 and again at 15, and the videos explore the methods by which she protects herself while living in an often dysfunctional home struggling with the

death of her sister from a heroin overdose. Edited together to emphasize awkward pauses and facial tics, the videos create an unstable narrative with interspersed footage that underscores the girl's relationship to her childhood toys and family pets. The disruptions of both image and sound, ongoing repetitions, delays and gaps in the narrative are all devices that reinforce the enigmatic identity of the speaker. It seems as though the Sandlers are already aware of the limits of the medium and are utilizing video tropes to not only complicate the narrative but to obstruct the viewer's points of entry into Sierra's story.

Since the narrative is unconventionally structured, the viewer must decode the various interruptions in order to gain access to the material; we are often unaware of the questions being posed and are rarely privy to a complete answer. Nonetheless, the responses that are shown in the video provide an intimate glimpse into a situation that is heartbreaking and consequently often deeply uncomfortable for both Sierra to share and for the viewer to watch. In *Sierra Blood Diaries vol. II*, for instance, the video shows alternating scenes of straight-on views of Sierra standing in a winter landscape with more ambiguous night shots of ducks noisily waddling through an enclosure. Intermittently these two separate scenes are interrupted with close-up views of the girl cuddling with a dog on a couch. The only narrative comes from Sierra's awkward and shy responses to questions and prompts from off camera that obscure as much as they reveal. "Um, I don't know," she begins, awkwardly looking away from the camera. "I stopped talking to my sister when I was nine, via heroin use, um, uh." The footage of ducks quacking in a night scene abruptly interrupts her



Joshua and Zachary Sandler, still from *Sierra Blood Diaries vol. I*, 2005.



Joshua and Zachary Sandler, still from *Sierra Blood Diaries vol. II*, 2008.

and then we just as abruptly return to the same scene, with Sierra alone in front of a forest. “It wasn’t abnormal, at all [laughs]... It was fun, in a weird way. In a really fucked up way, but, nevertheless, it makes you grow, um...” The rapid editing and distortion of some of Sierra’s responses creates a jarring rupture between an awkward moment of public revelation and private moments of escape with family pets. Though we occasionally hear the Sandlers prompting Sierra’s responses from off-camera, the relationship between the interviewer and the subject is not entirely clear and so the viewer is unable to construct a firm context. In the work of the Sandler brothers, there is always a fracture, a split, or a dissonance that undermines the authority of the speaking subject. The initial interview style on which the work is structured is quickly subverted as the moments of silence, including the girl’s nervous facial expressions, are slowed to last longer than her moments of disclosure. This effect undermines the serious nature of dialogue and ultimately provides unreliable truths.

Though these videos do not offer any clear or easy answers about what it means to attempt to relate to others through video representations, their framing of the role of the artist as a necessarily social one offers a new

strategy for understanding figurative representations in video. By positioning the artist as a visible and active participant in the constructions and maintenance of relationships, the works in “This is uncomfortable” remind us that, even when the artist is not explicitly pictured, they are actively involved in negotiating with their subjects. These works do not ask viewers to directly participate in interactions with the artist or with one another, but instead invite us to relate to depictions of social interactions that have already taken place. Figurative video practices position the role of the artist as necessarily relational by not only recording interactions, but by also situating actions in a temporal frame. This structural issue is important in recognizing that moments of awkwardness are a result of situations that happen prior to what appears to the viewer and that may continue long after one stops watching. In framing the practices in “This is uncomfortable” as a second wave of relational aesthetics, our aim is to re-open discussion about the types of relations and the power dynamics at play in attempting to relate to one another through video and to raise questions about the role of the viewer, prompting speculation about whether an encounter with a video representation can be a genuine, affective encounter with one another.

Endnotes

¹ Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 2005.

² Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* Dijon: Les Presses du Réel, 2002.

³ Claire Bishop, “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics,” *October* (Fall 2004), 51-79.

⁴ Ngai, 1.

ABOUT THE CURATORS

Arpi Kovacs is a writer, independent curator and recent graduate of York University’s art history master’s program. He is currently a graduate intern in the Department of Photographs at the National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C.

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