

THE DISAPPEARING SUBJECT

Looking for Slater Bradley

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Slater Bradley, *STONED & DETHRONED*, February 21–March 27, 2004 (included *Phantom Release*). *An Enquiry into those Kinds of Distress which excite agreeable Sensations (1773): Slater Bradley & Banks Violette*, September 6–October 11, 2003 (included *I'm Not Sad I'm Sure I Will Be*). *Slater Bradley: Here are the Young Men*, April 26–May 25, 2002 (included *Factory Archives*). All exhibitions at Team Gallery, New York.

PORTRAITS OF A NON-EXISTENT SELF

Accompanied by the mournful sound of *Always and Forever*, an eighties hit accidentally played backwards, Slater Bradley's *Inside a Times Square Burger King Where The Soundtrack Is Being Played Backward* (2000) begins with a close-up of a speaker in the ceiling. On the left of the screen, the top of a head appears. Arms reach for a burger, an onion ring, a napkin, a coke. An old man eats at the next table. The tape reverses, and we are suddenly trapped in time, on our way to the beginning of the loop. As the action goes backward, the music goes forward, mutating from an eerie babble into a faraway love song, saccharine and banal. Movements become choppy and images degrade. The restaurant seems to blacken and corrupt.

One of the few videos in which Bradley himself appears, *Inside a Times Square Burger King Where The Soundtrack Is Being Played Backward* is a paradoxically unidentifiable self-portrait. Shooting himself with a spy camera, Bradley allows only portions of his body to be seen. By adding a ghostly echo of his moving arms three frames behind the first, he creates a skeletal double image of the living, while objects remain inert. The loop acquires an almost Buddhist overtone, suggesting that we are transient, interchangeable beings enduring for an instant, flashing through a static material world. With continued viewing, the video becomes more and more disorienting. Differences between backward and forward blur. We remain in the middle of an unfinished meal, as if life consists only of meaningless eating in a dreary fast food restaurant where nothing changes and it's always the same time.

By endlessly stretching out such insignificant moments, film seems almost capable of arresting time. It is also the closest we can get to preserving a living person after death. But a person on screen is always a double, an illusory copy of a previously unique human being. The intertwined dichotomy between filmic fiction and truth is the heart of Bradley's work. He plays on the paradoxical and sometimes nonexistent differences between authentic and staged emotions, and real and fabricated situations, distinctions that are quickly being swamped by reality TV.

Bradley most often expresses his skepticism about his own subjectivity by taping his "Doppelgänger," Benjamin Brock, a look-alike discovered by chance when mutual friends at a club mistook them for each other in 1999. By shooting his double, Bradley implies that his off-screen existence is as illusory as the on-screen life he portrays in *Burger King*. The Doppelgänger video series began in 2001 with *Trompe le Monde* ("Fool the World" in English), a sensuous study of daily routine that follows a young man as he wakes up, showers, and leaves his apartment. The apartment is clearly Bradley's; his possessions appear. But as an exercise in voyeuristic narcissism, the video is misleading—the young man is actually Brock. Digitally bleached to pearly black and white, with sparing touches of vivid color, fragmented shots of Brock's body are seen in a series of claustrophobic spaces. In the elevator, footage switches to a grainy surveillance-type image, shot directly from security tape. Passing through the lobby, with its multiple reflections in mirrors and doors, the double goes out to the street and disappears. The camera re-

turns to the building for a spectacular shot of illuminated windows, then briefly moves in to reveal a woman eating dinner. The screen grows dark, and the loop begins again.

In spite of its provocative title, *Trompe le Monde* is imbued with an elegiac sense of possibility, due perhaps to the freedom the double finally acquires on his way to an unknown destination, and to the beauty of the light shining out of the high rise windows at dusk. Music of Brahms, heard when the double is getting ready to wash, and again when he walks away, joyfully communicates the immersion in life that rises from loss of self, making us forget we are spying on strangers. The classical music casts a dramatic spell over a mundane series of events, adding an exalted veneer to a video that is essentially a trick. Spying on Brock, it is as if what Bradley sees in the mirror is never really himself. Instead, his reflection has taken on an independent life of its own. No matter how he carefully he observes him, Bradley can never know his double's thoughts. Even their supposed resemblance really depends upon their being apart. Together, they don't look that much alike. They are only mistaken for each other when they are alone, which calls into question how well people ever see either one of them. It also makes one wonder if Bradley can even recognize himself, bringing to mind Nabokov's novel, *Despair*. Nabokov's narrator kills a stranger he believes is his double, hoping to be taken for dead in order to start a new life. At the story's end, it becomes clear that the resemblance was imaginary. The murderer fooled no one but himself.

THE UNIVERSAL STAND-IN

Bradley is entranced with the accidental, always on the lookout for coincidences to exploit. Songs played backwards, a resemblance between strangers, footage partially destroyed by a lab: such unrepeatable occasions are the epitome of reality, no matter how deceptively they are ultimately employed. For *Ghost* (2001), Bradley photographed his look-alike performing as the ghost of Ian Curtis at England's National Museum of Film during the opening of a *In a Lonely Place* (also the title of the last song written by Curtis, the British lead singer of *Joy Division*, who committed suicide on May 18, 1980). Dissatisfied with his own results, he noticed the surveillance cameras throughout the museum. In a sequence taken directly from a security screen, the double, seen mostly as a pair of legs, walks through the museum and leaves. The hissing mechanical soundtrack lends an ominous quality to the video, enhanced by the image's degradation. Already stored in low resolution, the appropriated second-generation footage takes on a dark moiré pattern, as bars of gray flash rhythmically across the screen, reinforcing our sense of alienation and doom. The fact that the security camera was actually recording a performance highlights the slippage between quasi-documentary, voyeuristic spying, routine surveillance, and staging in Bradley's work. Watching *Ghost*, we are seeing the surveillance camera watch the inauthentic Curtis that Bradley set into motion to be watched. For Bradley, a fervent Curtis fan, the doppelgänger now serves as a stand-in for someone he would like to have been, interposing yet another barrier between subjectivity and self-portrayal.

An equally ambivalent situation was instigated for the production of the two-channel video, *I'm not sad I'm sure I will be* (2001–2003). During a casting call Bradley set up in San Francisco, a series of inexperienced young actresses were shot by an appropriately inept agency camera-person in front of a dull blue backdrop. Concealing their nervousness under perky smiles, they follow the orders of a saccharine off-screen voice. After stating their names and heights and displaying their profiles, they each recite "Today is an anniversary . . . I'm not sad I'm sure I will be . . . I'm not sure I'm sad I will be . . .," the lyrics to a song Bradley wrote as a teenager. Trying to infuse the words with emotion through timing, tone, and gesture, the actresses do their best in a degrading situation: watching them undergo this humiliating display is both touching and discomforting. By sharing his adolescent text, filled with sentiment even as it describes a lack of emotion, Bradley sets himself up to be embarrassed as well. And by turning it over to strangers, he distances himself from the impact of his own words, turning them into a charade without losing his investment in the undisclosed event they commemorate.

In 2000, Brock had taped himself performing as Ian Curtis in an audition for *Transmission*, an as-yet-unfinished film on *Joy Division* written by Bradley's friend, Michael Stock. The grainy tape, altered and degraded by Bradley, became *Factory Archives* (2002), an almost indecipherable work that masquerades as an authentic bootleg *Joy Division* video. Bradley then upped the ante with *Phantom Release* (2003), an even more ambitious hoax. Modeled on the bootlegs posted on Kurt Cobain websites, it

was filmed with an old super-8 camera purchased in a thrift shop for forty-five dollars. Cobain's wide appeal is founded on his identification with truth, a truth that Bradley turns into a charade, again without relinquishing the sincerity of his own admiration for Cobain. The music conveys raw emotions without fashion or artifice, and the visual style is founded on an anti-materialist, anti-consumer aesthetic. Carefully edited to appear accidental, Bradley's footage features shaky camera movement and flashing choppy cuts that are sometimes rhythmically timed to the violently repetitive music. Colored lights flash, tinting the much more visible Doppelgänger red and pink. With hair brushed forward, covering his eyes, the double's face is never completely revealed. Knowledge of Cobain's suicide, almost exactly ten years before the exhibition of the video created from the footage, intensifies its powerful oscillation between the star's presence and absence.

Most recently, Bradley has effectively dissolved his own identification with his Doppelgänger by disguising him as Michael Jackson. At once singular freak and universal cypher, the ersatz Jackson is seen in a photograph with a pair of young boys in the snow in Central Park. Accompanied by the children he allegedly desires as he pursues his own unrecoverable childhood, Jackson is a tragic figure. With Bradley's styling, Brock takes on an uncanny resemblance to the star. His mouth and nose are covered with a surgical mask and his eyes are hidden behind aviator glasses. Jackson, the ultimate celebrity, has devoted years to altering his appearance, seemingly trying to take on a universal identity. As his skin lightens and his features sharpen, he has mutated into a bizarre personage

of indeterminate age, race, and gender. The more he changes himself, the more he covers up his face, the more recognizable he becomes, and the more easily we can be tricked by an impersonator.

Like the master of ceremonies in *Cabaret*, Jackson seems to be an agelessly ambisexual chameleon, yet he strangely personifies innocence for his diehard fans. In *Recorded Yesterday* (2004), the double again poses as Jackson, this time alone on a stage. Brock's hair is pulled back and his face is hidden under a tilted hat, resulting in another eerie resemblance that is heightened by his own extraordinary dancing. The silent footage, serendipitously damaged by the lab, seems to date from the pre-sound era. Images materialize out of blinding emptiness and then disintegrate, a reminder of the film's materiality. Sparkling blotches come and go, and stripes and streaks form a play between black and white in which the figure is ultimately eaten up by whiteness. Seen from above, the Doppelgänger strikes a pose, dances, and tests his moonwalk. The camera circles around him, regarding him from back and front, up close and at a distance. The viewer could be in the audience or watching from backstage. The double could be dancing in front of a crowd lost in darkness or glaring spotlights, or he could be rehearsing alone.

From *Inside a Times Square Burger King Where The Soundtrack Is Being Played Backward to Recorded Yesterday*, Bradley maintains an equivocal presence in his videos. Even when he's physically there, filming himself with a hidden spy camera, he doesn't show himself at all. In *Trompe le Monde*, the double device allows Bradley to pretend to search for a

nonexistent self. He can seem to reveal his intimate life, yet still hold on to his secrets. By replacing himself with a double, Bradley seems to be trying to disappear, experimenting with what it would be like if his consciousness no longer existed and his body just kept on going. In the Curtis, Cobain and Jackson videos, false individuality dissolves into false celebrity. Impersonating icons into which numberless fan identities have been submerged, Brock becomes a universal stand-in, a Doppelgänger for the world.

The slippage between reality and contrivance is Bradley's constant preoccupation. An unseen voyeur, distorter, and instigator, he sets up situations fraught with fake emotions that nonetheless

disturb. His seemingly casual videos are always meticulously planned, with the costumes, settings, cameras, filters, and editing techniques of particular times and places turning the making of the pieces themselves into part of his masquerades. Although very little happens in his videos, in monumental installations their theatricality can be overwhelming. Watching Bradley's videos, I am frequently moved but I always wonder why—a particularly contemporary sensation. Hidden behind the camera, doubting his own honesty, Bradley indicts himself as guilty of gross manipulation. In spite of his ambivalence, the videos communicate a piercing sense of temporary beauty, tinged with compassion and regret.

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From l. to r., top: *Inside a Times Square Burger King Where The Soundtrack Is Being Played Backward* (2000); *Trompe Le Monde*, 2001. Center: *Ghost*, 2001; *Recorded Yesterday*, 2004. Bottom: *Phantom Release*, 2003–04. Each work: Projection from a digital source, edition of three. Photos: Courtesy of the artist and Team Gallery, New York.

