Nelson Henricks

# *American Psycho(drama):*
## *Sigmund Freud vs. Henry Ford (2016 Redux)*

*Being surrounded by mass produced objects induces a kind of panic. How can I fix my relationship to an object when it is not one, but many? The object is schizophrenic and polygamous. This is not my lover's favourite cup/ashtray/ lamp, though it is identical to it in every way. Significance bleeds from one object to another: impostor objects evoke authentic memories. My alarm clock, with which I have developed a complex set of relations involving memory, sentiment and identification ("This is MY alarm clock") is the replica of an alarm clock which many thousands of people the world over possess. What is the relationship that all of us share? Our possessions are interchangeable, disingenuous, and commit infidelities.*

A selection of American performance-oriented works from the end of the 1990s describes a trajectory between consumer society and the psychoanalytic confessional. Emphatically low-tech and subtly comedic, the works of HalfLifers, Emily Breer and Joe Gibbons, Anne McGuire, and Animal Charm use mass-produced phenomena as a springboard for social critique. HalfLifers (Torsten Z. Burns and Anthony Discenza) act out panicked rescue missions using everyday objects. Breer and Gibbons' *The Phony Trilogy*, and Gibbons' solo Barbie series, target pop culture icons through delusional monologues. Anne McGuire mimics popular television genres, interrupting the comfortable flow of power within them.

Unlike the others, Animal Charm (Rich Bott and Jim Fetterley) use found footage instead of performance to reveal the madness of mass culture. By re-editing images derived from a wide variety of sources, they scramble media codes, creating a kind of tic-ridden, convulsive babble. Bott and Fetterley's strategy is, however, consistent with the other works, and even sums up the overriding ethos of these productions: that disruptive gestures can reinvest conventional forms with subversive meanings. The work of these artists can be set into orbit around three points: performance, television and madness. In doing so, we can perhaps shed some light on the state of American video art at the end of the 1990s.

### Performance, Television and Madness

Like their young British counterparts, these American productions recall the low-tech, performance-based works of the 1970s. The return to impoverished aesthetics signalled a break from the assumption that high-end technology was synonymous with artistic sophistication, a notion that was dominant in the early 1990s. Where these artists distinguish themselves from their historic predecessors is through their deployment of specific types of humour. Comedy, of course, played an important role in early video work: artists such as Martha Rosler, John Baldessari, and William Wegman spring to mind. In these 1990s works however, humour can be defined more pointedly as either stand-up comedy or as slapstick. Physical comedy focuses on the body under duress; the gap between Chris Burden and Buster Keaton is perhaps not as broad as some would like to imagine. Stand-up comedy, on the other hand, is a first person narrative employing humour to disseminate didactic information. Andy Kaufman and Laurie Anderson are two performers who blur the boundary between comedy and art, and whose work contains political or social commentary.

Not coincidentally, stand-up and slapstick are two of the types of humour most commonly used in television, which brings us to the second feature that distinguishes these works from those of the 1970s. Instead of the long duration and slow pacing that characterised early video art, these videos freely adopt the pacing and syntax of TV. Television syntax is used as a kind of lingua franca, a shared literacy which each of these artists exploit to communicate their ideas. What is important to stress here is that television is not the primary subject of these works, nor is it treated in a critical manner. For example, the Breer/Gibbons collaborations were made for TV, yet lack the sight-specific criticality of, say, Stan Douglas' *Television Spots*. Instead, television is viewed as a cultural fact, an inevitability, and a backdrop against which all activities take place.

At this juncture, it is perhaps useful to make a distinction between mass culture (a culture of mass-produced objects) and pop culture (a subset of these "objects" that enter into popular discourse). It is probably unnecessary to state that television, both the material object and its videotaped content, is a product of mass culture. Mass-produced phenomena all figure into

*Actions In Action,* HalfLifers, 1997

*Control Corridor,* HalfLifers, 1997

the works of these artists, whether it is junk and junk food (HalfLifers), pop icons (Breer and Gibbons), television genres (McGuire) or information on videotape (Animal Charm).

What I feel is significant is that each of the artists performs a kind of madness for the camera, a madness catalyzed through an encounter with mass-produced/multiple objects. In an informal conversation I had with the artist Joan Braderman when I was first encountering these works, she remarked that fear was the primary factor that distinguished these performance-based works from those of the 1970s. Bearing this in mind, perhaps what we are witnessing in these videos is neither fear nor madness, but instead anxiety. What did we have to be anxious about at the end of the 1990s? The eradication of nature? The failure of the body? Global economic collapse? The millennium? Or simply the simple fear of losing our individuality? This is not just the fear of becoming a fashion victim, of being forced to conform to the will of society. It is the fear of becoming isolated from political agency, the fear of being powerless as an individual in a society where the only viable mode of expression left is to consume.

***"We should perhaps identify madness as a viable response to that anxiety, an act of disruptive resistance, a refusal to be anaesthetized."***

When we watch the president of the United States announce on television that bombing has started in Africa, in the middle East, or in Europe, we feel far from the truth. Behind the television screen, truth is being constructed for mass consumption; disparate information is made to harmonize into seamless waves of soothing discourse. If independent video work of the late-'90s describes a complex interweaving of fear, madness and anxiety, we should perhaps identify madness as a viable response to that anxiety, an act of disruptive resistance, a refusal to be anaesthetized.

In her book, *The War of Technology and Desire at the Close of the Mechanical Age* (1995), Allucquére Rosanne Stone put forth compelling arguments linking new technology and multiple personality disorder. So perhaps the most appropriate response to mass culture is to adopt a multiple personality – not necessarily as a disorder – but rather, as a disruptive gesture. Many of these artists/performers seem to be caught in delusional states where they become someone else. This is not the same as acting. In theatre, the persona is free of fissures. Here, the spectacle is disrupted by an artist whom we see performing as him- or herself, a self-reflexive trait which owes much to the tradition of performance art. We can name this "low-tech", but we could also see it as a kind of self-reflexivity: a Brechtian distancing device that renders the artifice visible even as it is being created. As was the case for Brecht's theatre works, these videotaped performances function as a kind of experimental agitation-propaganda, using humour to make difficult ideas easier to swallow.

**HalfLifers**

HalfLifers is a collaborative project of Torsten Z. Burns and Anthony Discenza. In their work, they perform rescue missions. One such work, *Actions in Action* (1997), is packaged like an adventure show. For ten minutes, the HalfLifers' attempt to "rescue" one another (à la Kipper Kids) by applying yogurt, junk food, syrup, processed cheese, and baloney slices to each other's bodies. The footage, based on hours of improvisation, is accelerated so that all the actions are performed at high speed. The performers' squeak out dramatic exclamations in hysterical cartoon voices: "Do you feel anything? Is this working?" The scenes are panicked and hilarious: at one pivotal moment, the classic pie-in-the-face is applied as a superior "home-made" remedy. Even as one technique begins to rescue the subject, it quickly fails, and another cure is needed to supplant it.

If *Actions In Action* evokes the failure of the body, medicine, and memory, *Control Corridor* (1997) focuses on communication failure. Here the HalfLifers act out something resembling a space shuttle docking procedure using a number of disparate objects (toys, a telephone, motorcycle helmets, and other junk) as surrogates for high-end technology. Ironically, what the HalfLifers communicate is never more

*Pool Boy,* Emily Breer, 1997

*I Am Crazy and You're Not Wrong,* Anne McGuire, 1997

*Ashley,* Animal Charm, 1997

*Stuffing,* Animal Charm, 1998

substantial than the panicked fact of communicating for its own sake: "I'm in! Are you in? I'm in. Alright, I can hear you... I can also see you...." While mobile phones, voice-mail and email offer the promise of immediate communication and increased productivity, what they create is anxiety. Like kids role-playing for future disasters in the safety of their parents' rumpus room, HalfLifers reduce the chaos of daily life to a smaller, more manageable scale.

**Emily Breer and Joe Gibbons**

Role-playing as performed by the HalfLifers takes the backseat to outright delusion in Emily Breer and Joe Gibbons's *The Phony Trilogy* (1997). Combining Breer's digital animation with Gibbons' real-time performance, this series of three shorts recounts Gibbons fictional influence on Brian Wilson (*Pool Boy*), Iggy Pop (*Caddy*), and Francis Ford Coppola (*The Horror*). Though at first degree Gibbons' monologues read as conventional stand-up routines, their undercurrent is aggressive and grandiose, verging on paranoid: Wilson and Coppola are "stealing" his ideas, while Iggy is offering to trade places with him. These fantasies, depicted in Breer's disorienting and hallucinatory animations, stand in sharp contrast to the characters' actual social position: pool boy, caddy and shell-shocked Viet Nam vet. Gibbons is not just working class, but serving class. Illusions of class mobility are propagated through tantalizing visions of fame, yet in reality, they remain nothing more than this.

In his solo work *Multiple Barbie* (1998), Gibbons plays a smooth-talking psychoanalyst, gently attempting to unite a mute doll's multiple personalities. Part of a series of tapes on Barbie shot in Pixelvision, *Multiple Barbie* presents the audience with the double bind of Gibbons-as-psychiatrist versus Gibbons-as-madman. Are we witnessing a droll narrative, as some suspension of disbelief would permit us to presume, or are we instead watching a lunatic act out his own multiple personality, provoked by and channelled through the plastic husk of a Barbie doll? Gibbons performance – relentless in its intensity – allows us to flip-flop from one extreme to the other, leaving us with no sense of stability. *Multiple Barbie* and *The Phony Trilogy* speak in a very charged manner of the relationships we forge with the multiple, yet not ideologically neutral, cultural icons that surround us.

**Anne McGuire**

In the work of Anne McGuire, the mass-produced "object" is not a physical entity, but instead a series of genre conventions derived from television (the variety show, the talk show, and the music video). McGuire's screen presence amplifies the sense of the uncanny that lies at the heart of familiar forms, creating a vertigo that is, like Gibbons', both humorous and disquieting.

In *I Am Crazy and You're Not Wrong* (1997) McGuire portrays a Kennedy-era singer performing cabaret songs that careen from pathetic to pathological. Recalling the concert performances of Judy Garland, McGuire uses her beautiful voice to seemingly improvise a series of songs over a slurring, distorted orchestral accompaniment. In the video, McGuire evokes a vertiginous double bind: is she figuratively crazy like Patsy Cline or stark raving-mad like Charles Manson? The madwoman as a stereotype in popular music (as personified by Björk) comfortably conflates power and instability. What McGuire does is undo the sutures that bind these discontinuous notions together.

*The Telling* (1994/98) shows McGuire telling two acquaintances a secret about her past using a three camera set-up in the Desi Arnaz style. That intimacy is commodified isn't the strangest thing about this work. The fractured editing, silences and lapses suggest vast narratives far more evocative than anything revealed on screen. McGuire uses television vernacular to open up ambiguity and discomfort, two things that television strives to elide at all costs.

**Animal Charm**

The collaborative work of Animal Charm (Rich Bott and Jim Fetterley) participates in video's rich legacy of found footage and media deconstruction. Their interventions – distillations of music videos, commercials and infomercials sampled from a reservoir of neglected or useless images – offer moments of resistance.

If you took this text and scrambled the word

order, you would still have a sense of what it was about. But if you took a magazine article on physics, a chapter of *Pride and Prejudice*, or instructions on how to apply cosmetics and merged them together, what would happen? This is precisely what Bott and Fetterley do with television footage. By composting TV footage and reducing it to a kind of babble, they force television to not make sense. While this disruption is playful, it also reveals an overall "essence" of mass culture that would not be apprehended otherwise. Works such as *Stuffing*, *Ashley* and *Lightfoot Fever* upset the hypnotic spectacle of TV viewing, in turn revealing how advertising creates anxiety, how culture constructs "nature", how conventional morality is dictated through seemingly neutral images, and so on. By forcing television to babble like a raving lunatic, we might finally hear what it is actually saying.

**Psycho(Drama)**

It could be assumed that what Rosalind Krauss' text *Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism* (1976) tells us about video is that it is a self-centred, egotistical medium. I think the most intriguing idea to be gleaned from Krauss' text is this: that video's most significant essential characteristic is its ability to explore psychological states. Narcissism, sure, but what about voyeurism, sadism and masochism? What about fear, anxiety, paranoia and madness? If madness here is taken as a disruptive gesture that sets out to unbalance North American society's will towards homogeneity and control through consumption, these works testify to the power of individual gestures to create brief, and sometimes hilarious moments of transcendence.

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**2015 Postscript:**
**Revisions, Excisions & Additions**

This text was originally written in the summer of 1999 to accompany a screening of works presented at Pleasure Dome in Toronto, Canada. A revised version was later published in *Lux: A Decade of Artists' Film and Video* (YYZ Books, 2000). For presentation here, I integrated or eliminated footnotes to improve readability and adjusted expressions that tended to date-stamp the writing. Otherwise, I have resisted the urge to make major revisions, feeling that it was better to respect the flavour of the original, regardless of how my ideas may have changed over the past sixteen years.

Another revision that's worth noting: in its original form, *American Psycho(drama)* included a six-minute one-take video entitled *When I Was a Monster* (1996) by Anne McGuire. The artist requested this not be shown in this context for reasons that will become clear once you have read the following description. In the video, McGuire is naked, seated before the camera. She is recuperating from an accident: a series of metal pins – for setting broken bones – emerge from her left forearm. As the video progresses, she mimes a series of "monsters" to a relentlessly slow version of the B-52s' *Dance This Mess Around*. Functioning like a homemade music video, McGuire presents the female body as simultaneously erotic and monstrous. Or is it erotic precisely because it is monstrous? McGuire explores the complicity of voyeurism and exhibitionism, elaborating upon similar body-centred works of the 1970s by Canadian artists such as Kate Craig (*Delicate Issue*, 1979) or Lisa Steele (*Birthday Suit: Scars and Defects*, 1974), both of which presented naked female bodies as de-eroticized objects. Like Joe Gibbons' *Multiple Barbie*, McGuire's work forges a link between 1970s performance-based video art and its 1990s counterpart: I invoke it here so that readers may seek it out.

Finally, María Fernanda Cardoso's *Cardoso Flea Circus* (1997). This video was suggested as an addition to the compilation long after the program and text were completed, and though it's a video I like a lot, it wasn't initially part of my curatorial concept. If I was open to the idea of grafting it into the above-described works, it was because of Cardoso's wit, her engagement with performance and pop culture forms, and for her project's inherent lunacy and buggyness. That said, to attempt to integrate it into the fabric of my arguments risks committing a forced reading, which I fear would be disrespectful to the artist and her work. Instead, I offer the *Cardoso Flea Circus* as a line of flight – an escape hatch – a point of contact between these works and other performative acts of resistance.

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