The Underskin of the Screen: Performing Embodiment

Through the Looking Glass, an installation by Cris Bierrenbach.

-Cynthia Bodenhorst-

"The eye can confer the active gift of love upon bodies which have long been accustomed to neglect and disdain."

Kaja Silverman, The Threshold of the Visible World

"Love is lak de sea. It's uh movin' thing, but still and all, it takes its shape from the shore it meets, and it's different with every shore."

Zora Neale Hurston, Their Eyes Were Watching God

In the past few decades, cultural theorists have undervalued the role of love in the political domain. That is, we seldom imagine the potential of identificatory relations as powerful political and transformative social tools. But love is back, and so is the body along with the advent of new imaging and visualization technologies. The skin and the screen, two surfaces deeply implicated in love and violence, return with a vengeance in today’s media-dominated society to question the dominant fiction that there is indeed an essential and alienating dichotomy between 'meatland', as some netfans call the fleshly world of 'reality', and the cyber-, non-corporeal space produced by digital media.

To denounce the disembodied abstraction implicit in the increasing mediation of the image is useful when dealing with certain forms of instrumentalist vision that
manipulate the subject/object under view for purposes of control, such as consumerism, surveillance, and some types of ethnography. However, these pessimistic assessments must not be applied to all forms of visuality. For the past few years, languages and formats used to package and transmit information, like the Internet, the spectacle and the index, have allowed artists to create new and more radical inscriptions of the body, to question notions of spectatorship and authorship, and, most significantly, to challenge 'the screen' as the exclusive territory of consumerist mass media. An example of this revisionist approach is the installation entitled Through the Looking Glass, by Brazilian artist Cris Bierrenbach. Using video as a medium, the artist confuses her own body with the projection screen, creating a setting for performative practices that expose the contingencies of normative representations of female identity and sexuality. Love and desire return to embody surfaces and innervate the eye.

In spite of concerns that we now live in the society of the spectacle, Kaja Silverman argues: "[t]here can never have been a moment when specularity was not at least in part constitutive of human subjectivity." If so, what is different about the image today? How can we re-imagine the body today 'beyond' the binary constructions of subject/object, real/representation, and mind/body? "Wary of holism[s] but needy for connection" what kind of bodies are artists returning to? One thing is clear: the logic and value conferred to images has radically changed in contemporary society, due in part to the advent and development of new imaging and projecting technologies such as still photography, cinema, video and now the Internet. We live in an economy of the image and a society of the screen. In other words, our culture continues to
colonize most effectively in the domain of the visual. For example, as Susan Sontag states, "[w]e learn to see ourselves photographically: to regard oneself as attractive is, precisely, to judge that one would look good in a photograph." People "in industrialized countries seek to have their photographs taken—feel that they are images, and are made real by photographs." Social acknowledgement and recognition depend in part on lifting the subject 'out of life' and actualizing it as representation. We see the world as if through an imaginary viewfinder, a looking glass through which the world is produced as spectacle and through which we ourselves are produced as spectacle. In fact, industrial societies produce a constant flow of idealized representations for consumption while at the same time rejecting and misrepresenting others that fall outside the cultural norm. The reification of 'ideal' bodies through representations that create standards of beauty and essentialize what counts as female/male or as feminine/masculine relies more and more on the production of a "cultural image-repertoire" that constitutes "the means by which our culture figures [...] 'difference.'" These normative representations inscribe "social identity" through what Silverman calls "the cultural screen." I argue that it is thus only through interventions within the visible realm and through the production of new images and alternative imaginary identifications, that we can begin to intervene where dominant culture most powerfully exercises both symbolic and bodily power: the screen and the skin.

This interrupting task might just fall in the hands of artists and other creative social practitioners whose aesthetic work constantly subverts that which is visible and invisible through alternative forms of embodied looking. While Bierrenbach's
installation may be seen as part of a more general revival of the body in video art since the 1990s, I am more interested in considering it as a persistent tactic of the collective and female subject in an era of the screen, that is, a political and agentive subject. The installation enacts an "ethics of vision" that implicates our "look" and "the gaze" as complicitly connected in the maintenance of ideality and the cultural screen. It does so by transforming "the looking glass" from a technology of power that serves for incorporative, narcissistic, or exclusionary identifications, into the skin of "the other." It opens up the screen as a thick site receptive of a loving look: a site where inter-subjective exchanges take place and where self and other are posited as reciprocally implicated and ethically dependent on each other. Finally, by showing us how we see and through performing the underskin of the screen, I argue that the installation outlines a politics of viewing that calls into question distanced models of reading today's image-culture. Bierrenbach implicates us in acts of affective interpretation.

Loving to Look 'Through the Looking Glass'

Cris Bierrenbach loves to look. It is not by chance that she is both a video artist and a renowned photographer in Brazil, known both in the commercial and artistic fields. Her choice of media is as much a sign of the times as a vocation through which she not only adds images to the stock of the world, but comments on the world made by these images through her imaging work. Technologies of imaging and vision and how these intersect with the (female) body are central issues in her art practice.
Through the Looking Glass was initially conceived in 2004 as a site-specific installation for Base 7, an art gallery in São Paulo, Brazil. The video shows the artist's face and upper torso projected from the inside of the exhibition space onto the glass panel of the gallery's entrance door. The image, an eight-minute video loop, is only visible from the outside of the gallery space, that is, from the street. The face fills the entire screen looking distorted, as if pressed against a virtual glass. As she moves uncomfortably squashed against the surface her face deforms into all sorts of disturbing expressions. The door/screen appears to imprison her while delivering her, larger than life, to the spectators' view. In the accompanying soundtrack, Bierrenbach reads a carefully crafted and paced assemblage of text segments, written by women as personal profiles for virtual chat rooms or Internet dating sites.

The initial impulse when one sees the installation is voyeuristic. As Internet users we are used to monitors and quickly recognize the language used in chat rooms, readily assuming the discrete position of an observer who loves to look: the attitude of a web browser. Cris Bierrenbach understands the screen in a Lacanian sense. In Lacan's visual theory, the screen should be understood as both external to the subject—as the "cultural screen" or "as the presence of others as such"—cutting through her/his field of vision; and internal to the subject, as articulating the subject from within, on an unconscious level. In this sense, Bierrenbach uses the screen not merely as a projective surface but as a thick topography where subjectivity is inscribed through a complex dynamic of projection and introjection. Her use of textual and bodily references fleshes the screen with the presence of "the other," creating a corporeal screen both seductive and disruptive. In other words, the installation is not just a
commentary on the symbolic capture of the subject by the visual, but stages "the self" as an effect of its cultural inscription through vision.ix

In today's market-driven world, we are surrounded by images as idealized projections of objects, set up for consumption. Consuming is often the terminal action in consumer culture, where the look and the onlooker are under cultural pressure to apprehend the world from a pre-assigned, normative, and habitually passive viewing position. At the same time, in terms of women's identities and desires, these are constructed as an effect of the visual economy of the gaze, conscripted by normative representations that serve to establish sexual, racial, and class difference.

Cris Bierrenbach appropriates the cultural industry's mechanisms, such as advertising and electronic panels, to challenge the capitalist abstraction of the image and the inherent violence of the instrumental gaze, through the articulation of an ambush on the structure of viewing. The purpose is to destabilize the viewer/viewed, subject/object positions through a shifting message of critique and agency. Her strategies vary, from the billboard-sized image to an unconformable body that hardly fits on the screen, to the intensification of video's flesh-like graininess, to placing the spectator in public view. As she often does, this art project begins with her own body; she presents her skin and the screen as two surfaces mutually implicated in alternative forms of embodiment.
Performing Otherness

The dominant trope of video art is the body. While writing about the practices of video artists in the 1970s, Rosalind Krauss suggested that narcissism constitutes the very organizing principle for video as a medium. In fact, many of the works that can be considered the cornerstones of video art, such as Paul McCarthy's *Press* (1973), Hannah Wilkes's *Gestures* (1974), Vito Acconci's *Command Performance* (1974) and Lynda Bengalis's *On Screen* (1972), use the artist's body as subject matter in one way or another. While the analogy between the closed-circuitry in video as a medium and narcissism as a self-referential psychological model is relevant to the present discussion, it is more important to consider these works as laying down the grounds to theorize issues of embodiment and subjectivity vis-à-vis representational technologies.

One significant example of body art produced in the 1970s is that of Cuban-born artist Ana Mendieta. Cris Bierrenbach's installation echoes Mendieta's performances from 1972-74, made while Mendieta was still an art student at the University of Iowa. Bierrenbach's installation resembles Mendieta's series of six *Glass on Face Imprints* and six *Glass on Body Imprints*, in which she uses a pane of glass from a sculpture by Robert Smithson to obliterate her appearance. Mendieta simply smashes her naked body and face against the surface of the glass. Mendieta and Bierrenbach show a subject that does not take its own image as the object of love thus questioning the self-absorptive economy of the narcissistic desire. In both artists, the body does not make a return as "the Real," and the subject does not
return intact. Rather, the subject as wholeness is shown as an illusion, while the anatomical body is interrogated as the basis for identity.

In *Glass on Body Imprints* Mendieta uses her body to disidentify. By pressing her breast and nipples against the flat glass she distorts the body parts typically associated with the female anatomy and a desirable feminine body to eliminate any trace of it. She levels her butt and genitals making her body two-dimensional and transforming it into a kind of graphic imprint where sensuous curves become flat, pictorial circles. Blurring the distinction between male and female forms, Mendieta confuses gender identity, dislocating it from its dependence on organs. Society’s dominant fiction, formulated in the binary opposition between masculinity and femininity, is probed, along with its predominant signifiers, penis and vagina, as uncertain markers of sexual identity. Mendieta's *Glass on Face Imprints* more closely converse with Bierrenbach's installation. Both works resort to disfiguring the face as the body's central referent of individual identity through the use of minimalist props and simple gestures. Subjectivity and selfhood, which are indexically located in a person's facial features, assume unfamiliar forms. As stark gender and identity examinations both artists stage a full-frontal assault on normative desire, by distorting the main features associated with ideals of beauty and femininity and through the staging of alterity: the ugly, the disfigured, the non-ideal, the strange. Identity becomes the movement of meaning itself, that which unglues the mask from the face and the "perfect body." In both cases, the artists refuse to present a full body, resorting instead to fragmentary and close-up views. This strategy works to displace
the normative symbolic alignment of the gaze with masculinity and of subjecthood as possessing a total and totalizing view.\textsuperscript{xiii}

While there are key similarities between the works of these two artists, there are also important differences, in particular from the reception point of view. While Bierrenbach’s installation is spatio-temporal, Mendieta documented her typically solo performances through photographs that constitute the only record of her art practice. These performance photos have acquired a particular appeal as one-of-a-kind objects, fixing or increasing their auratic character and value. Their rarity has contributed to their particular fetishistic nature as sought-after collectibles. Still photography tends to maintain a discrete and transparent relationship between subject and object. That is, photographs induce a relationship of voyeurism that relies on the entrenched coordinates of Cartesian perspective. This is true even when considering the potential photographs have to activate desire as argued by Roland Barthes in \textit{Camera Lucida}, as the "belong to me" aspect of photographs dominates.\textsuperscript{xiv} This polemic around photography needs to be questioned further, in particular with the advent of digital photography, which relies less and less on material/corporeal origins and where multiple originals are readily replicated. Nevertheless I am more interested in here establishing a difference between the point-to-point kind of visuality, which we can call \textit{perspectival vision}, in still photography—as in the case of Mendieta’s performance photographs—and the "non-punctal televisuality" inaugurated by the advent of digital technologies and the proliferation of the digital screen.\textsuperscript{xv} As Amelia Jones argues: "[i]n a historical sense televisuality might be understood as signaling the collapse not only of Cartesianism but of the visual
politics of domination that both motivated and gained from the structure of absolute
difference posited by the Cartesian self-other relation."

The political implications of this shift are important, as more and more individuals are
becoming producers and new inter-subjective networks are becoming available.
Olivier Asselin writes about the screen suggesting that "there isn't a place, not an
object or a body, that is not potentially equipped with a screen and/or a camera and
that cannot as a result become interactive and hooked up to a network." Instead of
dwelling on discourses that lament the disappearance of the body in the
technological image, or the complete replacement of the perceptual field by a
representation readily manipulated by capitalisms, racisms and sexisms, I would like
to insist, as Walter Benjamin did in the 1930s, on the inherent resistance to
authoritarianisms implied in the relationship between art and technology. With the
advent of digital optics, as Paul Virilio suggests, a kind of "sightless vision" has been
initiated that enables a "long distance telepresence." Paradoxically, the Cartesian
coordinates of the Western gaze are simultaneously shattered and multiplied,
inaugurating "the industrialization of the non-gaze," where there is no longer a unified
focal origin for reason and knowledge. While both Mendieta and Bierrenbach
show the relationship between body and representation as arbitrary and productive,
Mendieta’s body has been at least partially fixed through aural photographs that
establish the perspectival distance necessary for a fetishistic relation. Bierrenbach’s
body, on the other hand, returns transformed as screen-flesh and multiplied
televisually.
The soundtrack in Bierrenbach's installation represents the acoustic space of this "distant telepresence," creating a kind of presence-in-absence. The sound originates from textual segments collapsed into a montage of undifferentiated and juxtaposed voices presented through the single voice of the artist. As bodies off-scene, the women's narratives stand as referents of this televisual presence and as the space of utterance. The textual fragments extracted from personal self-descriptions locate women as producers and self-actualizing individuals:

"I rent myself but I'm very expensive:       "Will not be walked all over.
Bitch and arrogant: yes, please!           I'm a REAL girl. Real photos. Real
Straight: yes, like Madonna                thoughts.
Like to tease: yes                        Real emotions. May not be perfect, but
Like to eat: yes (a lot) Like mirrors: oh  I am real."
hey mamma!       

The acoustic space works by creating not so much a feminist or counter-site to dominant visual politics and their reliance on stable differential and differentiated viewing positions, but a kind of distance from site: a distance from the dominant representational epicenter. The off-scene body of the women, their desires, fears, uncertainties and convictions, are brought into view by these bits and pieces of audio into an arena of shared meanings. The artist's aesthetic gesture extends into the space of the social the communicative impulse of the women that envision an audience, and vice versa.
These self-descriptions can also be understood as self-portraits that function like a *pose*. More than a masquerade, the pose re-inscribes agency into the field of normative vision as an intervention by which the women *give themselves to be seen* in a particular way. This suggests a more complex relationship between the image/screen, the gaze, and the subject that sees or is seen. Although one might argue that there is a limited agency that these women have in controlling the way they are apprehended by those that see/read them on the Internet, I suggest that agency occurs at different levels. The most evident one is the *pose*, as the women "play" with the screen and manipulate what the viewer "sees," evidencing him/her as a desiring subjectivity.

The second instance of agency comes from Bierrenbach's disruptive action that identifies *at-a-distance* with the women through the performance of alterity. While we hear the voiceover, Cris performs the anti-aesthetic body. Without veiling desire, but augmenting it, the artist permits us to better see the workings of the cultural gaze, while also promoting an identificatory relation *through* the image with "the women themselves." In other words, the viewer not only sees from an unexpected vantage point—literally manifested by the displacement to the street—but also through a radical disarticulation of his/her ego. Without affording imaginary identification with the image or self-image, the eccentric or out-of-scene aspects of the installation creep into the realm of the viewer's unconscious and stake a claim as "implanted memories." The viewer is engaged in a "remembering look," unconsciously open to otherness through an estrangement of self. As the artist's face contorts, we hear and have access to that which does not belong to us; we remember the memories of
others, those women that resonate with their pleasures, fears, and desires. The viewer is thus moved to care, to pay attention, to listen, and take a second look, beyond the complacencies of self and the limitations of the image-culture repertoire. While Cris performs otherness in a way that precludes libidinal incorporation, she re-inscribes the screen from an abstract geography into a feminine cartography, as a site where struggles over meanings, identities, and sites are brought back into focus.

The Underskin of the Screen

A screen is a protective membrane, a safe and discrete place from which to look, a border, and a tool of ideological interpellation. While the installation literally stages the idea of the self as an effect of the cultural inscription through visual capture, it cannot be understood as a mere commentary on the symbolic arrest of the body by the image. The installation insistently fleshes the screen, restoring it as texture and as a performative site for identification and identity. Cris's aesthetic gesture has more to do with the act of looking, strategically subverting it from a passive into an active and ethical performance of seeing. This is the reason why Chris Bierrenbach chooses to directly address the materiality of the screen as a way to in-corporate the structure of viewing; it is the screen that she is mostly concerned with, materializing it as a corpus.

The "screen" in Lacan's model of the field of vision constitutes the "locus of mediation;" that is, it is the site where the image takes place and where the gaze and the subject of representation meet. This site, where subject and object, self and other meet is further defined by Jones as a complex and disruptive site, rather than a
"site of unity," where "subjects reciprocally define and negotiate one another within in the visible [realm];"\textsuperscript{xxiv} The screen can be understood as an alienating site, or equally, as a performative site of subject formation, where a complex dynamic of identification and projection illuminates the unavoidable dependence that we have on others for our sense of self and individual identity. We are simultaneously the subjects and objects of looking.

While for Lacan the screen is mainly a flat surface, described as a "thrown-off skin" or an "envelope," Bierrenbach's screen is reformulated as thick flesh, a contact surface that is tactile and corporeal.\textsuperscript{xxv} Paradoxically, rather then veiling the simulacral aspect of the projected body, Bierrenbach uses the language of advertisement, the billboard-like size of the projection, to highlight the artifice of the image and to embody the screen. Her face and neck occupy the entire surface that assumes a skin-like quality: a visible porous texture attained by amplifying the graininess typical of video. Cris's embodiment of the screen, though resolutely technologized, performs an appropriation of the projecting surface; she fleshes the screen transforming it into an intimate epidermis.

In normative forms of representation, idealization is constrained to corporeal bounds and restricted "to certain subjects, while rendering others unworthy of love."\textsuperscript{xxvi} This abjection works by naturalizing certain bodies as essentially ideal, and others as unfit for representation. This is the basis for the pathological and often violent relationships that individuals tend to have towards themselves and others. We hate our bodies if they do not conform to sanctioned ideals, or repudiate others that do not
conform to cultural norms. Bierrenbach alters the screen through a determinate fleshing of it, transforming it from a transparent tool of ideological interpellation into an opaque in-corporation. From a surface that reflects the emphatically corporeal representation of the ego, the screen is reinstated as a thick and performative container that encounters the viewer as an incarnated presence.\textsuperscript{xxvii} Furthermore, by addressing the door of the gallery space, Bierrenbach destabilizes the authority of the institutional space, rendering the "white cube" as an empty surface only relevant from the street level. The screen and the gallery are relocated to the street as a collective and public terrain. This strategic (dis)placement calls attention to the door as the passageway between inside and outside, public and private, while also organizing an attack on the homogenization and inherent violence of the neo-liberal city as a spatial confusion of privatized space and de-historized sites.\textsuperscript{xxviii} The viewer is also relocated to a symmetrical position to the image and exposed as voyeur to public view. The voyeur becomes the object of voyeurism and interpellation, an aspect that is exacerbated through the sound that incessantly repeats the words of soliciting women. A sound of flesh meeting the grain of our skin; bare words touching both screens:

"Who can hold me tight; keep me warm, through the night?"

"Who can wipe my tears, when it's wrong, make it right?"

"Who can give me love, til I'm satisfied?"

"Who's the one I need in my life."

"Attention: I only communicate via the scrapbook + Underestimated from day one + Refugee from Kabul + 12 years on the run + finally made it to Berlin + Singer (getting better and better) + Hoping to really settle down some day + Watch it! I am a slap in the face."
Bierrenbach stages her body off-scene in order to expose cultural exclusion: that which is not presented onscreen or is simply overlooked by the dominant representations of the body in general, and the feminine body in particular. *Through the Looking Glass* adopts a sort of anti-peepshow setup that troubles both the aestheticizing gaze of the video/cinematic projection and the voyeuristic or pornographic gaze. The Narciso and the Voyeur stand exposed, put on the scene, where spectatorial comfort is troubled. The spectator's taken-for-granted autonomy is not afforded the distance or the coherent position of a viewing subject at the apex of the focal coordinates. If the artist's body persists in this installation it is not as remnant or an abstraction of flesh, or to repeat a narcissistic self-staging, but as an arousing otherness that saturates the eyes. This artistic endeavor takes us back to the Surrealists' projects that "countered the realist eye that cuts and pierces with another orb, the eye, neither totally blind nor all-seeing, that weeps with the memory in the face of violence." \(^{xxix}\)

**Looking to Love: the Indifferent Look**

The image exists in the domain of the social. Looking, apart from being a subjective activity, is an interaction, a mediation between the individual and the collective, and a form of socialization. A driving question in this essay is how to recover a notion of the subject as a self-conscious, embodied, and political agent whose look is accountable for the world she/he sees.
So far, I have argued that the aesthetic choices that Cris Bierrenbach deploys in her installation, rather than a symptom of the disappearance of the body in the era of the screen, work through a corporealization of surfaces as a way of re-imagining alternative subject positions. The transformative potential of the installation relies on conferring ideality—rendering marginalized subjectivities and sexualities culturally legible and worthy of idealization—by stirring the subject to take a loving look. In this manner, this work contributes to an understanding of the politics of visual representation as an ethics of the subject within the field of vision, while reclaiming the screen and the skin as performative and collective sites.

In the smaller and shorter version for e-misférica, the artist returns the installation to where it should perhaps dwell: the original and intimate spaces of computer monitors. The installation is conceived as an open system of signification where the spectator is predicated as a "part of the picture." It is in the look where agentive transformation might occur within the normative field of representation. This transformation hinges, in part, on the acknowledgement that as subjects we depend on "the other" for meaning. The looking-self is both libidinally sustained and irreducibly incomplete, which can lead either to idiopathic identification—to cannibalize the other within the self—or heteropathic identification, a subject that dares identification with another as other, thus locating "the self at the site of the other." The installation's formal choices work through what can be explained as triggering an identificatory failure that enables the latter form of identification; our look, usually aligned with the position of mastery and the representational
coordinates of the camera/gaze, is exposed as "the other" along with the concomitant fantasy of such an alignment.

Furthermore, the corporealization and displacement of the screen and the disjunction between what we hear and what we see truncates the smooth operation of the screen as a site for narcissistic identifications or normative representational fictions. Cris stages the disappearance of the idealized body while presenting her voice imbued with a sense of mystery; this readies the viewer to translate her artistic endeavor without residue into emotion. For a moment the world is transformed into inner space where our heart stops distinguishing between the "outside" world and its own beating.

To encounter the installation is to face a visual breakdown. Instead of seeking to incorporate the ideal or reject alterity, the eye is engaged in an act outside the confines of the self and the economy of visual transactions through libidinal investment. A void gives the viewer the opportunity to renegotiate the relationships between self and other, and between self-sameness and self-other. Here lies the ethical dimension of Bierrenbach's project at the level of a conscious second look and an intensification of unconscious desire. Our desires and phobias that occur as normative projections upon racially, sexually and economically marked bodies are transformed when through conscious agency we dare to look again.
Bierrenbach's performatic technology relies on this *seductive promise* of mutual transformation, where both artist and spectators come together in the temporality of the event's unfolding. Here is where the social character of her performative practice joins the ethical, as it works within the "public space of appearance." The installation thus presents an aesthetics of the subject-in-the-making as an alternative to identity politics, usually based on the idea of a collective essence. Instead, the installation provokes a solidarity that *cannot* rely on difference, but is predicated on *indifference* with respect to the properties of the subjects' singularities. And here is when we return to the artists' face as a tactical staging of what I mean by a singularity in indifference. Her face is the face of "the other;" it stands for the graph in "whatever face" where "human nature continually passes into existence." The installation highlights inessential and performative singularities as extensions of each other's existence. Cris Bierrenbach offers her transforming face as a lovable singularity to return "the self" and "the other" as neither universal nor essential, but as intelligible and communicative singularities, subjects-in-alterity, constituted in otherness and through desire.

*Through the Looking Glass* enacts subjective resolution through the positing of love and permanent irresolution as viable subject positions. In this way it operates against normative projections of sexual, racial and class difference that deny the constitutive alterity and exteriority of others and of the image. It insists in productive and asymmetrical looking: a *seeing seen* that re-inscribes the other as the locus for loving identifications. This "revisionist look" is an *indifferent look*, as it lacks self-interest and
it does not seek to re-establish difference, irony, or looks with disdain; instead, it
takes into account the necessity of every subject to be seen in order to "be." This
*indifferent look* is a willful act, interested in seeing the other *in-difference," as such;" it
is thus actively looking to love. xxxvii

The power of Bierrenbach's work lies in the appropriation of mechanisms used by the
cultural industry in order to redeploy the gaze, from a camera-like operation, as an
embodied look. xxxviii Through embodying the screen, Bierrenbach enacts a
decolonization of projective surfaces—the skin and the screen—that outlines the
potential for a new politics of seeing based on a loving and ethical relation of self to
otherness. Her work brings the eye to bear for the collective, and therefore political,
dimensions of seeing. In this way, Cris Bierrenbach the artist challenges the
economy of abstraction of the image and the gaze by re-locating the body *on-* and
off-screen as an agentive, sensual and collective corpus, where looking shifts from
an individualized experience into the ethical domain of *relational subjectivities*.

**Notes**

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i Silverman, *The Threshold*, 195. All references to Silverman come from this
book unless otherwise noted.

ii Borrowed from Haraway, 151.

iii By "the visual" I mean to suggest an understanding of the field of vision as
including simultaneously a set of representational as well as material practices. When
I refer to "the gaze," "the look" and "the cultural screen," I understand them as terms within the visual field that are constrained by the representational and material practices contextually and culturally available at a certain time, some of which also have a transhistorical permanence.

iv Sontag, 85, 161.

v Silverman uses both terms, "cultural image-repertoire" and "cultural screen" throughout her book.

vi The "screen" does not represent exclusively the symbolic order, in a Lacanian sense. Nor do I understand the imaginary as an exclusively feminine or pre-symbolic domain. Rather, the imaginary is a necessary terrain to restore and intervene within the symbolic order, as it constitutes the realm where ideological interpellation occurs. Furthermore, the symbolic order cannot be entered without imaginary mediation.

vii It is helpful to understand the "gaze" as described by Ewa Lajer-Burcharth as "the imaginary apparatus that situates the self in the realm of the symbolic through the agency of the screen" and the "screen" as the site of the cultural articulation of the subject, a surface on which its body takes on a meaningful shape" (189). The camera/gaze is simultaneously a logic of representation and a series of material practices in a complex interaction with each other; it can be understood as the visual variant of the symbolic order and includes the look of the Other.

viii The audio lasts 16 minutes and is longer than the video loop. The image and the sound are therefore constantly changing, and the spectator never sees the same
alignment between image and sound. The artist used five different online meeting sites to create the sound for the installation, choosing the ones that were not exclusively restricted to dating. Bierrenbach produced two audio versions for the installation, one in English and one in Portuguese. The personal profiles she used where originally written in either language, with no translation on the part of the artist.

In a Lacanian sense, the ego first comes into existence as a self-image during the mirror stage, making the ego "a representation of a corporeal representation." In this sense, all visual transactions involve a narcissistic stage that make the visible world possible only as subjects move through projective and reflective surfaces, through screens. Subjectivity is understood as a complex dynamic of projection and introjection, through an othering first of self and then of others, and that makes subject formation first and foremost an issue of surfaces. I use the terms "introjection" and "projection" in relation to Lacan's visual theory and through an elaboration of that theory by Kaja Silverman in *The Threshold*.

Krauss, 51-64.

Krauss's argument is that video installations exhibit the projections in a closed-up environment in which the viewer is encapsulated spatially as a captive audience. The viewer and the artist in most of the examples that I give are typically placed in a closed-circuit relationship with one another while detached from the outside world. The technology of video projection itself can also be understood as a closed circuit, as the projection device, the screen, and viewer are linked apparatically in an integrated system. Krauss understands this circuit as "smooth"
and uses the narcissistic metaphor to make a parallel between the artists' projects and the libidinal self-investment typical of narcissism. Although I disagree with the idea of any smooth representational system, I want to stress that there is a significant difference between these works and Bierrenbach's. It has to do with the publicness of Bierrenbach's installation. I argue that *Through the Looking Glass* foregrounds interruption through a clearly open system of signification rather than a smooth spatial or psychic enclosure. Furthermore, the installation emphasizes the presence of otherness as an alternative subject position to the self-identical subject.

xii The allusion to Mendieta's work is mine. Cris Bierrenbach was unaware of Mendieta's early performances when she produced her installation.

xiii For a description of Mendieta's early performances see Michael Duncan.

xiv See Jones, 81-85.

xv Ibid.

xvi Asselin, 9. Through digital screens individuals are not only receivers but also producers and actors by means of all the interfaces that connect them to the screen and/or enable interactivity such as the mouse, the keyboard, the touch-screen, the helmet, the suit, and the motion detector.

xvii For a series of articles on the new status of the screen see Issue 113 of the periodical *Parachute*.

xviii Virilio, 138-147.

xix For a discussion of the function of "the pose" in photography, see Silverman's study of Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills*, in *The Threshold*. 
Silverman uses Lacan's concept of the "given to be seen" to refer to the visual manipulation exercised through the normative representations made available by the culture image-repertoire. I see a more agentive dimension through the way the women manipulate their personal profiles in order to be seen, understood or read in a certain way—usually in a flattering manner, but often exposing less than "ideal" personality traits—by an imaginary or real audience.

I owe this reading to Kaja Silverman and her examination of Cindy Sherman's photographs, where she states that "the Untitled Film Stills go even further: they promote our identificatory relation not with the ideal imago which the women they depict so dramatically fail to approximate, but rather with the women themselves, and they make this identification conducive of pleasure rather than unpleasure" (207).

Silverman, 183-185.


For Lacan, the relationship of the subject to the screen is somewhat pessimistic and alienating. Silverman and others expand Lacan's visual theories by elaborating the concept of the screen through phenomenological models of subjectivity (Merleau-Ponty) and a more embodied and performative understanding of vision (Merleau-Ponty, Jones, and Silverman).

Jones, 76.

Ibid.

Silverman, 37.
Silverman argues that in order to escape the bodily ego, we need visual texts that activate in the subject the "capacity to idealize bodies that diverge as widely as possible from ourselves and from the cultural norm" (37). The representations of alternative bodies should also work in a performative manner, in order not to produce simply another reified ideal, as is often the case in the advertising industry.

It is worth considering the increasingly complex relationship between the screen and public space, as screens proliferate throughout as surveillance and advertisement mechanisms affecting issues related to accessibility, privacy, and common use.

Feldman, 73.

This return is significant, as it refutes tendencies in new media theory that insist in the obsolescence of the body in the information age. Bodies can never be made of digital data alone, no matter which side of the computer screen they are on.

Although "the gaze" is usually described by Silverman as extra-subjective and apparatical, aligned with the camera, "the look" is not exclusively subjective and the relationship between "the gaze" and "the look" is complex. Silverman describes the look as a function of the camera/gaze while the gaze depends on the eye for its operation "much as a machine uses the worker for its operation" (222). The subject's look then "is a provisional signifier of the gaze for that other who occupies the position of object in relation to [the looking subject]" (221).
The difference between these two identificatory models is: "Heteropathic identification is the obverse of idiopathic identification; whereas the latter conforms to an incorporative model, constituting the self at the expense of the other who is in effect 'swallowed,' the former subscribes to an exteriorizing logic, and locates the self at the site of the other."

The idea of a second look is inspired by Silverman's idea of a "revisionist look."

Hannah Arendt (197) refers to the "space of appearance" as one of the functions of the polis for the Greek democrats. She describes this space as indispensable for one's subjectivity to become inscribed, as it is only in this common ground where one leaves a mark of one's actions and deeds and becomes visible to others.

The term "indifference" does not imply an equivalence to "sameness" or a return to the binary opposition between equality vs. difference. Inequalities of power matter, but as Joan Scott argues, the opposition of equality vs. difference is not antithetical to conservative agendas. For a discussion of these debates see Scott's "The Sears Case." Bierrenbach's *incorporations* stand in stark contrast to the homogenization of space and bodies typical of capitalist expansion.

Agamben uses the terms "whatever" and "as such" in *The Coming Community*. In Agamben, "'whatever' refers to that which is neither particular nor general, neither individual, nor generic." Both terms are central to Agamben's
philosophical meditations to designate contemporary forms of sociality through inessential commonalities.

xxxviii Lacan uses the term "function of seeingness" to refer to the gaze as a function that pre-exists the subject's look, in much the same manner that language does, but from which emerges the look. In this sense, the gaze is equated with the symbolic within the field of vision and, like language, provides signification to the subject. In Bierrenbach's installation, the gaze is reconstituted through redeploying it as a determinate embodied and material practice. Bierrenbach puts the body back into the act of viewing through embodying the structure of the gaze.

Works Cited


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