

## For Immediate Release

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### SFMOMA PRESENTS VIDEO INSTALLATIONS BY CANDICE BREITZ Artist Gives Hollywood Actresses a New Script and Hands the Mic to John Lennon Fans

From October 1 through December 20, 2009, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA) presents *On View: Candice Breitz*, an exhibition featuring two video installations by the Berlin-based South African artist whose bold and often darkly humorous works explore how pop stars and Hollywood celebrities shape our identities and transform society.

Breitz is best known for her video portraits of pop-music idols, which do not actually portray the stars themselves, but instead consist entirely of tribute performances made by communities of fans. Her practice also includes sampling, altering, and remixing clips from popular Hollywood movies to create fractured vignettes that amplify the clichés and stereotypes perpetuated in commercial cinema.



Candice Breitz, *Working Class Hero (A Portrait of John Lennon)* (composite), 2006; Courtesy the artist and Jay Jopling/White Cube; © Candice Breitz

Organized by SFMOMA Curator of Media Arts Rudolf Frieling, the presentation will center on the U.S. premiere of *Working Class Hero (A Portrait of John Lennon)* (2006), the latest installment in Breitz's ongoing music series (previous works focus on Bob Marley, Michael Jackson, and Madonna). Here the artist recruited twenty-five ardent Lennon fans to individually perform the late musician's 1970 album *John Lennon/Plastic Ono Band* in a professional recording studio. Aside from capturing intimate portraits of each participant, the resulting twenty-five-channel video installation provides a broader take on the phenomenon of fan culture.

On view in an adjacent gallery is Breitz's six-channel work entitled *Mother* (2005), which immediately preceded the production of *Working Class Hero* and forms part of the artist's acclaimed double installation *Mother + Father* (her contribution to the 2005 Venice Biennale). The work isolates six film performances by famous actresses playing the role of mother and edits them into a pastiche of exaggerated 'motherness' that reflects on the connection between Hollywood's representation of dysfunctional parenthood and the cultural experience of being raised on movies.

Together, *Working Class Hero* and *Mother* represent the range of Breitz's practice and also raise questions about the global impact of mass media, the complicated allure and pitfalls of the entertainment industry, and the way these forces influence contemporary consciousness.

"Breitz is interested in the biographical aspect of pop culture, the way music and films become personal soundtracks to our lives," says Frieling. "For her, and for so many of her contemporaries, using preexisting material from the mass media in order to create art is urgent, necessary, and practically unavoidable—a condition that mirrors the way commercial entertainment

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infiltrates all of our lives. Breitz's art reminds us of how important it is to step out of the role of passive consumer and digest mainstream media to our own ends."

Breitz has created four portraits of pop-music stars to date. The first, *Legend (A Portrait of Bob Marley)*, (2005), captures performances by thirty Jamaicans, each singing their own interpretation of Marley's posthumous album, *Legend*. Next, working with German-speaking participants in Berlin, she produced *King (A Portrait of Michael Jackson)* (2005), an installation that gathers sixteen renditions of Jackson's *Thriller* album. This was followed by *Queen (A Portrait of Madonna)* (2005), made in Milan with thirty Italians singing the compilation album *The Immaculate Collection*; and finally *Working Class Hero (A Portrait of John Lennon)*, filmed in Newcastle upon Tyne with twenty-five mostly British fans singing along to Lennon's first official solo album after the breakup of The Beatles, *John Lennon/Plastic Ono Band*.

As with all the portraits, Breitz followed a set of formal parameters in creating *Working Class Hero*. She chose performers based on their genuineness as fans rather than on appearance or talent. Hundreds of self-identified enthusiasts who responded to Breitz's ads were required to complete a lengthy questionnaire designed to gauge the authenticity of their devotion. Finalists performed alone with minimal to no direction from Breitz, choosing what to wear, how to relate to the camera, and whether to move or dance between tracks. Each sang along with the album from start to finish, thus the running time of the video matches the length of the album, 39 minutes and 55 seconds.

Breitz strips away the album's original vocal and music tracks, leaving the viewer with twenty-five synchronized, *a capella* renditions that play on a row of vertical screens arranged in a long gallery. The nonhierarchical framing encourages comparisons among the fans' performances, from the cool, minimal gesture to the expressive, self-conscious act. With the celebrity figure now absent, the fans' imitative efforts serve to emphasize the memory of an idol and their emotional identification with his status as a working-class hero.

The album Breitz selected for this project is one of Lennon's most introspective and cathartic. Recorded at a time when the musician was undergoing psychotherapy, these intimate songs relate to childhood pain and Lennon's self-reinvention following The Beatles' breakup. In the searing track "Mother," Lennon laments the loss of both his parents early in life. It's clear in the fans' impassioned performances that they relate to such despair, which brings into focus Breitz's interest in pop culture as the lowest common denominator among people from drastically different backgrounds, or what she describes as an "extremely degraded lingua franca."

Archetypal notions of the maternal also figure in Breitz's *Mother*, a video installation that looks at mass media representations of parenthood. Presented on six plasma screens arranged in a semi-circle, the work lifts iconic celluloid mothers out of their respective films—Meryl Streep in *Kramer vs. Kramer* (1979), Faye Dunaway in *Mommie Dearest* (1981), Shirley MacLaine in *Postcards From the Edge* (1990), Diane Keaton in *The Good Mother* (1988), and Susan Sarandon and Julia Roberts in *Stepmom* (1998)—distilling from these Hollywood tearjerkers the characters' heightened moments of distress and defensiveness about being a role model.

Breitz's signature editing process isolates each actress against a black background, unmooring the performances from their original context and turning snippets of dialogue into absurd soliloquies. The confessional and self-analytic mode of these erratic monologues suggests a therapy process, appropriate given the almost psychotic quality that Breitz's editing technique lends the performances. Beyond Hollywood's portrayal of motherhood lies a more complicated media obsession with famous

actresses in their real-life roles as mothers. In mapping the star-fan relationship onto the mother-child relationship, Breitz explores how the public projects onto and identifies with celebrities as well as the fictional characters they portray.

In conjunction with the exhibition, SFMOMA's education department will host a roundtable discussion with Candice Breitz, curator Rudolf Frieling, and additional speakers (to be announced) entitled "More About Pictures, or Appropriation Now" on Thursday, October 22, at 7 p.m. in the Phyllis Wattis Theater. Using SFMOMA's exhibition and the 2008 conference "Takeovers and Makeovers: Artistic Appropriation, Fair Use, and Copyright in the Digital Age" at UC Berkeley as starting points, this conversation takes up appropriation in contemporary art. The roundtable is copresented with The Art, Technology, and Culture Colloquium of UC Berkeley's Center for New Media, and is preceded by an artist and curator talk with Breitz and Frieling at 6:30 p.m. at SFMOMA.

## **ABOUT THE ARTIST**

Breitz was born in 1972 in Johannesburg, South Africa, and currently lives and works in Berlin. She holds degrees from the University of the Witwatersrand (Johannesburg), University of Chicago, and Columbia University (New York), and has also participated in the Whitney Museum of American Art's Independent Studies Program (1996–97). She has had solo exhibitions at De Appel Foundation, Amsterdam (2001); Modern Art Oxford (2003); Moderna Museet, Stockholm (2004); Castello di Rivoli, Turin (2005); Palais de Tokyo, Paris (2005); and White Cube, London (2007). The artist has contributed to biennales in Johannesburg (1995); São Paulo (1998); Istanbul (1999); Kwangju (2000); Taipei (2000); and Venice (2005).

*On View: Candice Breitz* is organized by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

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**Koret Visitor Education Center:** Open daily (except Wednesdays): 11 a.m. to 5:30 p.m.; open late Thursdays, until 8:30 p.m. Summer hours: Open at 10 a.m.

**New admission prices starting May 30, 2009:** Adults: \$15; seniors and students: \$9; SFMOMA members and children 12 and under: free. Admission is free the first Tuesday of each month, and half-price on Thursdays after 6 p.m.

SFMOMA is easily accessible by Muni, BART, Golden Gate Transit, SamTrans, and Caltrain. Hourly, daily, and monthly parking is available at the SFMOMA Garage at 147 Minna Street. For parking information, call 415.348.0971.

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