

Doubling: an interview with Monique Moumblow
by Mike Hoolboom

MH: Video art is such a rarely seen momentum, marginalized even in the art world where it might have felt at home, never secured a perch on television, and theatrical screenings are rare. What drew you to this rarefied field?

MM: I think I'm a reluctant video artist. Every time I finish a tape I say this is the last one and I'm just going to focus on writing from now on. But a few months later I'll find myself in the middle of another project. So I guess something keeps drawing me in.

I started out doing performance art, but I never really resolved this idea of an "audience." Something about the relationship between a performer and a live audience didn't sit well with me. In certain performances where there is too much attention given to the exchange between the performer and the audience, things become too restrictive, or too much about that interaction, for me anyways. So I think that seeing early, performance-based video art (in particular works by Vito Acconci and Colin Campbell) was probably what first drew me to the medium.

I think that was my initial impetus for making videos, but my more recent work has veered away from my earlier, performative tapes and become something quite different.

MH: Winter Fruits is your first public work, a beautifully lyric short, downright filmic in its concern for texture, rhythm, colour and composition. These days, when video art is produced by the kilo, the detailing and craft of this piece is especially striking. It appears deceptively simple, mixing butterfly pictures with a shopping trip. When Canadian fruit is sent to Chile the enclosed apple is regarded as the most exotic of all fruits. When Chilean fruit is opened in North America a black widow spider crawls out unexpectedly. This exchange between different parts of the world suggests that meaning is context bound, and also hints at the relation between viewer and viewed (who is watching? From what place?) Can you talk about how this work came about, why the butterflies, and the two pictures of the globe that appear at the beginning and the end, providing a frame for proceedings.

MM: It's funny that you talk about the tape as being filmic. The one thing I remember about making the piece is that I really wanted to use a dissolve. But it was made in a primitive edit suite, which had only two decks: a player and a recorder. There was a live feed from a studio camera in another room, so on the fly, I re-shot the image of the butterfly off a television. The footage was probably dubbed a couple of times to get the timing right, so it all ended up being pretty degraded.

The image at the beginning of the tape was the earth, but the one at the end is actually the moon. I liked that they could be read either way. It is, as you note, a piece that is very much about context. My partner, Yudi Sewraj, is from Guyana and he told me that each year his aunt used to send the family a box of apples for Christmas. As a child, he thought they were the most delicious and exotic fruit he'd ever tasted. To me, apples seemed boring and ordinary. The tape began from that simple story and the juxtaposition of the urban myth of finding a black widow spider in a bunch of grapes.

The butterfly was originally an image I used in a performance with Anne Russell. Anne uses a pair of butterfly wings to transport herself across the surface of the moon. I think this is a pretty common image—a moth against the moon. My interest in butterflies at the time had to do with their use as a symbol of something exotic/feminine, but in a pretty cliché and often humorous way. I was also interested in Nabokov's use of the scientific word "nymphae," and its connection to the term "nymphet"... but I think I'm getting a little off-topic here. Anyways, I think the initial inspiration for the images in this video was a plastic butterfly that I saw on the side of a house. I don't know if it's still the case, but in Nova Scotia people used to attach giant, colourful butterflies to their houses. On grey winter days it was funny to see all these tropical looking butterflies. So when I came across this very bizarre National Geographic footage of a

bird eating a butterfly off a tiny conveyor belt (I could almost picture it as a juicy, little mango in some supermarket) it brought the two stories together.

MH: Winter Fruits narrates something about the myth of stereo, the mystery of speaking or hearing two things at the same time, or the ability to maintain contradictory thoughts. The title is already a tip off, along with the exotic apples. Can you comment on these dualities, and how the montage works to complicate either/or binarisms (it suggests that we don't have to make a choice between this and that, but instead allow both thoughts to exist at the same time, in stereo).

MM: Two contradictory thoughts... I think these kinds of odd juxtapositions are always circling around in my mind. Not like a stream of consciousness or anything like that. I could never write that way. I'm way too uptight. It's more like having two incongruous things exist side by side in a very controlled manner. Things that are very peculiar to me: like Cheerios and urine, or sugar and glass.

I'm fascinated with the idea of doubling, it's something that's always been a part of my work, two voices or two conflicting narratives. But beyond any philosophical implications, I guess these dualities are also a strategy. A place to work from. What does a butterfly have to do with fruit? What does fruit have to do with the moon? You start from there and work backwards to find threads that connect them.

I don't know if I can comment specifically on the montage of Winter Fruits. It's been so long since I made the tape. But for me the montage always has to undermine the text (or dialogue or voice-over). Otherwise what's the point? I never see the montage as illustrative of the text. It's much more fun when it's doing its own thing. I think all the elements in Winter Fruits are simple, but the different directions that you can go with them are complex because they are all allowed to exist, as you say, in the same space.

Liabilities

MH: Lao Tzu wrote, "The name of a man is a numbing blow from which he never recovers." Your Liabilities: the first ten minutes suggests that naming is a liability, and is an essentially transforming agent, a screen through which one views and collects experience. There are two characters, Anne and Monique, who are alike except for their names, but this single difference sets them off on very different paths. Can you comment?

MM: I had never heard the quote by Lao Tzu before. It really struck me. Naming has always been an obsession with me, maybe because I have mixed feelings about my own name. I never really felt like it belonged to me. But on the other hand, I have no desire to change it. I don't necessarily dislike it; I just don't feel like it refers to me. I have twin daughters who are nineteen months old. When we were trying to choose names for them, I was a wreck. I was so overwhelmed by the responsibility of it. Especially because of all the work I had done with Anne on the Liabilities tapes. Every name that Yudi and I looked at seemed like it had the potential to destroy their lives. This one was too difficult to pronounce, that one would be too easy to make fun of, etc. We were in hospital for a week and we still couldn't settle on a name. The nurses had to refer to the girls as "baby A" and "baby B." Then one day I realized that if we didn't make a decision soon, the names "A" and "B" were going to stick. So we did, and I think we did ok, but sometimes I wake up in the middle of the night thinking that maybe we should have named them something else.

I really do think that naming is a liability. The work with Anne began with a very simple premise—how each of our lives would be different with another name. Nothing more complicated than that. It started out as a series of somewhat improvised video letters between us, and later became a tape.

MH: Butterflies return in Liabilities: the first ten minutes as an iconic motif and holdover from Winter Fruit. You appear both as yourself, Monique, and as Anne. When you are "dressed like Anne" you appear in a photograph with butterfly wings. When you sift through a box of things Anne sent you, you pull out a pamphlet about butterfly and insect worlds, and another book called Butterfly which Anne wrote under the pseudonym "Katherine Harvey." What is it with all these butterflies?

MM: Hmm, the butterflies... I can't comment on Anne's interest in butterflies. I think it's pretty unsophisticated. Well, maybe unsophisticated is an unfair way of putting it. Let's just say it's an unconscious obsession. She has an enormous collection of butterfly paraphernalia. It's huge, nutty. If something has a butterfly on it, Anne buys it. There are candlesticks, bags, wind-up toys, linens, books, cigarette lighters, toilet paper... A number of years ago we put together an installation in Halifax showing part of her collection. On one evening, Anne gave a reading from *Butterfly*, a romance novel she claims to have written. In the book, *Butterfly* is the name of a brothel where women go and have sex with male prostitutes. It's very campy. It would probably make a great film.

My own interest in butterflies really started with "Lolita" and the history of Nabokov as a butterfly collector. This strange blurring of his art and life. I was interested in the connection between three words and their origins: nymph, nymphalid, nymphā—referring to a young girl, a butterfly and the labia minora. I think that every time a butterfly appears in this work, there is a quiet reference to something a little dark, but with a sense of humour. If that makes any sense. The exact meaning of the butterflies isn't specific. It mutates with each tape. They operate more as a marker.

MH: Your doppelganger Anne writes in three genres: travels, scientific discoveries and romance novels. These three suggest discursive fields (or is it the body? The legs, the heart, the brain)? Why these three?

MM: Again, I can't really answer for Anne about these three genres. I doubt that she would consider them discursive fields. It's all blurred. If you look at Anne's writing it would be difficult to tell what was a romantic story and what was a paper on her scientific research. She gave a talk at the Nova Scotia School of Art and Design; there is a section about this in the video. She showed about half an hour of slides of the "Blaine" family. (I don't believe this family is in any way related to Anne.) The presentation wasn't funny or interesting enough to be theatre, and even for an art audience it lacked enough content to be a "good" performance.

MH: Anne is described as a recluse (shut in Monique perhaps) receiving most of her information from TV travelogues and coffee table magazines about exotic places. Even these information dispensers are displaced, at a distance.

MM: Yes, Anne is a recluse. She's a kind of modern day Jules Verne. (He never left France in his entire life.) But unlike Jules Verne, Anne has quick and easy access to any information about anywhere in the world. It makes her a good liar.

I think there are layers of distance going on here, both in Anne's existence as a recluse and my barely concealed hostility to her. Anne communicates to me through letters and video, but never in person. I have never written back to Anne. However, in the tape I do talk to the audience about her. I think that this distance speaks a lot about naming and our fragmented self/selves.

MH: *Liabilities* ends very abruptly, it seems as if there's going to be more to it. This cut (the end) produces and maintains the mystery of the doppelganger, the double, as if, despite the calm recitations on offer, you must not, dare not, say any more.

MM: Yes, there is more. And yes, I probably shouldn't say more. Most of it is off-camera. It's an ongoing project. I really don't know if I'll make more tapes with Anne, but there are appearances. She usually goes out every year on her birthday. I still get letters from her, and of course, the occasional postcard.

Joan and Stephen

MH: Your tape Joan and Stephen raises question of witness and the primal scene. I'm wondering if you believe, a la Slavoj Zizek, that "violence can serve as a fantasized protective screen... that the images of utter catastrophe, far from giving access to the Real, can function as a protective screen against the Real. In sex, as well as in politics, we take refuge in catastrophic scenarios in order to avoid the actual deadlock (of the impossibility of the sexual relationship, of social antagonism)."

MM: I think so. Although it's easier for me to think of this idea in terms of violence, than in terms of sex.

I have always had a hard time talking about the first part of the tape in terms of a "primal scene." I honestly always saw the first section from the point of view of the mother. "Joan" is my mother's name. Maybe in terms of standard filmic language I haven't exactly shot it from the mother's point of view, and perhaps that's a failure in the tape. But I think it's probably impossible to have a child in any film and not have the audience automatically identify with that character. I've been writing from the point of view of a mother for a long time, years before I ever had children of my own. In a lot of my writing there is a mother who is, how shall I put it? Not exactly cruel, just someone who isn't able to differentiate very clearly between what is appropriate and what isn't. Someone who has a slippery sense of what is "real" and what is make-believe. In some ways, she's on the same level as the child, but she's always aware of her position of power and has a lot of fun with it.

I've been packing up my studio for the past couple of weeks and the other day I came across all my notes for Joan and Stephen. I didn't have a computer at the time, so there are pages of typewritten text, some of it actually cut and pasted. It's all on bright orange paper in my very uneven typewriter font. I felt nostalgic seeing that font again.

I realized as I was going through all the written material that Joan and Stephen was a tape that had many subtleties that I didn't really understand at the time I made it. I think everyone else had a better understanding of the tape than I did. It's only recently that I've come to appreciate some of the complexities of the piece.

When I was reading through the original script and some of the writing that never made it into the video, I realized that although the video revolved around this idea of the viewer and the viewed, there was also this fantasy of unconditional love. I think this is less present in the final tape, although there are still traces of it. The original text had this relentless and desperate longing in it, which eventually falls apart because even a blind lover could become bored.

MH: Joan and Stephen features a framing narrative, conventionally shot, which offers a glimpse of a parental couple eating and groping at the stovetop while their daughter looks on through an overhead grate. The bulk of the movie is taken up with shots of you in bed talking about your imaginary boy. "If I'd been a boy my parents would have named me Stephen. I can't really picture being male so I decided to invent you." What is the relation between these two sets of images?

MM: For fun, let's just say nothing, that there is no direct relationship between these two images. But after saying that, of course once you put two things together there is always a relationship between them.

Sometimes I think the real relationship between these two sections is more about film and video, than about the content. These sections play off of each other and our expectations of what film or video is. For example: the first section is in black and white and it's shot on film, so we assume it's a flashback scene, and the second part is on video and hand-held, so it must be intimate or confessional. And the tape does fit neatly into both of these assumptions, but when you begin to look at it more closely, maybe it doesn't.

The video features every combination of watching or being watched. There are elements of surveillance, as well as the 70s art-video aesthetic where the performer watches you, the audience. It's a game on many different levels. The two sections are really playing out the same game, but from different perspectives.

Just for the record though, there is definitely no narrative tie-in between these two parts. It's funny how often people have tried to create a continuous narrative with the piece.

MH: You bring the camera into bed with you where it's close by, almost touching. You speak intimately to your video mirror, but this is still performance, a performance of your real and fictive (male and female?)

identities. Have you ever accompanied your intimate life with a camera (by intimate I mean any of the range of intimacies: anger, grief, sexuality, sadness...)

MM: I immediately answered “no” to this question because I think most of my work is more scripted than it lets on, but then I kept thinking about the tape *Having Coffee with No One*. It’s probably the tape that is closest to my intimate life, even though it comes across as pretty dry. This is a really difficult question though because as you say, it is still a performance. On the other hand, all of my work is so obviously connected to my personal life that if you change a few names, etc, you’re getting pretty close to something. I don’t know. I’m not really someone who uses a camera often. I have to be in the middle of a pretty specific project to pull it out of the closet. I haven’t ever gotten over the discomfort of being behind a camera.

MH: Your fictional double addressed through the camera is masculine, but this double might also be seen as camera or viewer. Your words conjure “the male gaze.” You invite us into your bed to talk it over, to talk to us, to grant us various attributes and tastes (toast and coffee in the morning). Eventually you speculate that “he” (also “us” the viewers) is mostly blind, and that the initial frisson of pleasure arrives with the avoidance of being watched. But the deeper pleasure, you note, is that you are free to look without being seen, which of course is exactly the state of the audience. We can look at you without being seen. In this sense you, the performer, are blind, you can fill the room with your words, but you can’t enter the room to see who is watching.

MM: My blindness is the irony of the whole thing. All I really want is a “blind” male gaze and by that I mean an uncritical gaze—a gaze that isn’t cruel or doesn’t scrutinize. Throughout the tape I go about trying to construct that, first by making Stephen blind and then by taking away his body. In the end I’m left with an outline on a mattress and an audience that I can’t see.

It’s true, the audience does have the pleasure of seeing without being seen, but I think there is a rupture there. The tape makes the audience uneasy and I don’t think it’s simply because of this idea of a “returned gaze.” There is something else going on, but I have difficulty putting into words exactly what that is.

MH: Later you trace the outline of the missing body “like the silhouette of a murder victim.” This tape expresses a longing for embodiment, in its references to early video art with its one camera-one person bodily evocation, it re-reads this history as a longing for a lost body. (Or suggests that fiction is necessary to move outside the solipsistic modernity of the monad, the one). Can video help return us to our bodies?

MM: Stephen’s body is an absent one. I used to think that his outline on the mattress was about longing for a real body, someone to fill that outline. But I realize now that the only way for any intimacy to exist within this tape, at least on my terms, is for that body to remain missing. And in a funny way, Stephen’s body is really the body of the audience. So when I speak to Stephen, I am speaking to you. I am tracing your outline on the sheet. I am taking away your body so that there can be something shared between us.

Can video help us return to our bodies? Perhaps. I’m not sure that I want to return to my body. It seems too frail, too messy, too complicated.

MH: Do you believe it’s necessary to make pictures of catastrophe, for instance, the images which accompanied news of the tsunami disaster? How do artist’s pictures relate to this global media, they are so small, are they worthwhile at all? Do you worry that your pictures are only shown in venues where the converted are already seated? Do you feel as a first worlder of pictures, that your pictures carry a political responsibility?

MM: No, I don’t think it’s necessary to make images of catastrophe, but I don’t know how to imagine a world without them. We live in such a culture of images.

Outside of financial reasons I've never worried that my videos are only seen by a few people. I'd love to have a bigger audience if it meant that I'd make a little money, but usually I'm pretty happy if two or three people turn up at a screening. I suppose I aim for a kind of integrity though perhaps "integrity" is too pretentious. I just don't want to make "bad" work, whatever that means. Is what I do worthwhile? I don't know. I think I used to have a clearer sense of what was worthwhile and what wasn't. As I get older, things just seem more complicated.

I think that within my own work my pictures carry a political/personal responsibility, but I recognize that I have very little control over where these images will end up, or how they will be used. They're on video. I have tapes at libraries and distribution centres. Anyone can make a copy and do what they want to with the material.

I suppose I'm a pretty hypocritical here. I'm totally comfortable using pirated footage in my own work, but I'm not too happy about the possibility of someone else using my images.

Three Waltzes

MH: Three Waltzes hosts a literary structure. You present three visual tableau sequentially, followed by a section entitled "Notes" which reflect on, or seem to reflect on, the "purely visual" experience of the "three waltzes." Did this structure arrive out of the material or vice versa?

MM: I think it was actually both. I had a very concrete idea of the structure before I began working. But the video became even more tightly structured when I began editing. The piece was originally titled "Five Waltzes" and there were going to be five short sections. I had wanted to construct the whole piece without using any language. At that point, I was feeling like I relied too much on my writing. So I edited five self-contained sections, which were made up of very simple actions and music. When I watched the finished edit though, I felt it was somehow incomplete. I wanted to include some kind of text, but I didn't want it to interfere with the immediate experience of watching the three sections. I recalled the idea of notes, as an afterward, but I also thought about "notes" as a musical reference. I think placing the text at the end of the tape goes back to something we talked about earlier. A desire to have the images and text working against each other. In this case, that's achieved by displacing the words.

MH: The first dance shows a woman pulled up off a chair by another over and over before they swap roles. Both wear elaborate leg bandages. Why do they never look at each other? (Because they are 'only bodies?') Are social interactions always so coded that role-playing is the best we can do? (Is there no self to which we return, only the frames of presentation we have inherited?)

MM: I don't think I ever gave directions when we were filming this section. That we never looked at each other is just what happened. I'm not sure why. Perhaps it was because we were very focused on what we were doing. In the end, though, the lack of eye contact is really important and foregrounds the fact that they are just bodies like you say. They are injured bodies or more specifically bodies faking injury. The fake injury is a visible sign of something that is hidden.

MH: The first note relates a longing for illness (and its easing of responsibility and blame. How can I be guilty? I'm sick!) It specifically mentions wanting arthritis so you can get off a chair like your grandmother did. Is this gesture the punctum (is there a moment in someone's life that looks back at you, claims you, demands you?). Is that the connection between "you" and "your grandmother"—the way you get out of the chair—a relation which can be practiced and rehearsed with others?

MM: Punctum. Oh yes, definitely. I sat on this section for ages and wasn't sure that I wanted to include it in the tape because it was so particular to me. I didn't know what kind of meaning, if any, an audience might take from it.

A longing for illness was frightening to admit to. It seems perverse to wish for pain and suffering. I felt that on some level I was making fun of my grandmother's severe rheumatoid arthritis, which in my childhood

was wrapped up in this horrible Catholic guilt, all centered around the idea of bearing pain stoically. Maybe "making fun" isn't quite the right word, it was more like "having" fun with something that was so serious. I still feel slightly guilty about it. I know that probably sounds extreme, but showing this tape to my mother was more uncomfortable than showing her a tape that was sexually explicit.

The longing for illness wasn't about avoiding responsibility and blame, it was more like a child faking a flu to get a little attention. Any attention. It's funny but as I'm writing about the piece I'm reminded of how much all the sections are about feeling invisible.

Here are two people pretending to be crippled, helping each other get out of a chair. Neither one really needs help. But if they didn't need help there would be no point to their relationship. The connection between me and my grandmother is that gesture of rocking.

MH: In the second 'waltz' two people stand in a room. She drops dishes on the floor while he stands with his back turned to her, trying to remain oblivious. Her face is blurry, I think you've done something to the image to manage this blurriness, can you say why? She's the actor and he's the reaction shot. It looks like an allegory of traditional gender roles, she's all feeling (all body) while he's in his head, waiting to do something. Of course they have problems, but he can only deal with them by turning his back. He can't hear what he hears. He can't see what he sees. Is that a reasonable reading of the scene?

MM: I think the fact that her face is blurry shows her in-betweenness. She's not a ghost, but she isn't completely there either. When I first blurred the face, I worried that the effect was so subtle that people might think that it was a glitch. I really don't think I consciously knew what I was doing when I added the blur, but it felt somehow wrong to have the face visible.

He can't hear and she can't speak. It's a game which asks who takes responsibility. Describing this scene in terms of traditional gender roles is interesting. It's the typical image of an angry woman and a man ignoring her. But there's something different this time. It's flat. The act of throwing dishes should be violent or aggressive, but it seems like it's born out of boredom rather than any domestic tension. There's a humour in the lack of emotion, which I think is what makes their relationship very similar to the other sections. They're playing out prescribed roles.

It's funny whenever I watch this section I'm reminded of going to an opening at YYZ in Toronto, I think it was for a show of Tom Sherman's work around 1987. While we're watching the tapes an elderly couple comes into the gallery. They're having an argument. Or she is. She's yelling at him and he is completely silent. He's actually pretending that he doesn't know her and of course it's obvious that he does. It was very embarrassing. The weird thing about the whole incident was that it felt so staged that I'm still not sure if it was a performance. It felt like it was part of the work. It was quite surreal.

MH: The second note is entitled Poltergeist. It reads: "When I go to a party no one remembers I'm there." The woman (the one who is all feeling, all body) doesn't exist, so he can't hear her. Her experience is not her experience, because she needs him to affirm it, or at the very least, not to erase her moment as it occurs.

MM: I think it goes something like this: I don't say anything. But on the other hand, you didn't ask. If you asked, you'd give me the space to answer, or to speak. I don't think that this is entirely about gender for me, but it's definitely about relationships. How we erase or don't erase each other.

MH: The third 'waltz' shows a pair of couples posed in front of the camera, then walking the streets. They pass one another 'accidentally,' and this moment is replayed three times. You and Yudi are one of the couples—is this important to know? Why this accidental meeting (in our meetings with one another is it never our bodies, only looking and language that intersect)?

MM: Is the fact that it's Yudi and I important? I think it is if you know. It inevitably changes how you read the scene. But if you don't know, then it's not important.

This section is about doubling in a very particular way. Yudi is Indian and I am white. It's a marked unit. Whenever we were out together and spotted a couple with the same make up, i.e. Indian man, white woman, we'd point it out and joke about it, in a very dark way. We'd say, "That relationship's not going to last," or "You look happy now, but wait a few years." I'm not sure what the joking was about. Maybe it was like a nervous laugh or a way to speak about our own tenuousness as a couple.

This accidental meeting occurs through looking. The gaze is repeated three times in closer and closer detail. The cross flirting with the eyes was like swapping, or the suggestion of it. The idea that perhaps their relationship is no different from ours. It's interchangeable. Seeing your double is supposed to summon the uncanny but somehow it doesn't here. The music that accompanies this section is constructed from samples of an orchestra tuning up. It begins quietly and builds, but the climax never really occurs, the image eventually becomes silent.

MH: Does the narrative of Three Waltzes describe the leaving behind of invisibility, the becoming-visible through love, and joining with another with whom one can be looked at?

MM: I don't know if it's about leaving behind invisibility. Maybe it's just about projecting yourself into something else. A we.

Kevin

MH: Kevin opens with your parents singing a fragment of an old miner's song ("I sold my soul to the company store.") The song is about a man who makes so little for his backbreaking work that he is condemned to work forever. Why this song?

MM: I worked with my parents on this project for quite a long time. I think we shot off and on for about a year and a half. At first they were having a lot of fun, joking about being the stars of a big movie, etc. But eventually they got sick of the whole thing and would start to groan every time I pulled out the camera. I was at a loss for what to do to make it fun for them, so one day in the kitchen I asked them to sing a song. I have no idea why my father started to sing this particular song and you can tell that neither one of them knows the exact words.

Anyways, the song was only meant to be an exercise and I never intended to use it in the final video. But when I began editing a year later I decided to include it as a framing device. The video opens with the parent's song and then ends with Kevin's song.

The opening song speaks about a number of things. I guess every child imagines that their adult life will be different from their parents. They're going to have lots of money, no responsibility, or hardships. There is really very little about my parents in the video. I tried hard to edit out any details about them or their lives, but the song offers a little hint.

MH: Throughout Kevin your parents tell stories of the incorrigible Kevin, the bad son, while we watch home movie moments of you as a child. When I was growing up and felt my parents were misbehaving I imagined that my real parents, the origins of sweetness itself, were locked and bound in the upstairs closet, while their evil doubles were free to torment me. You pull a reversal on this familiar childhood terror, renaming your childhood moments as belonging to Kevin. Your mother tell us that they had two daughters so these stories of a bad seed boy couldn't belong to them, only to your reconstructed fiction. Once again there is a pull of naming and identity, and a longing to be someone else at the same time.

MM: From the beginning, I really wanted this project to be a collaboration. My parents and I would create another child. Conceptually it was like going back and having a voice in how you were going to be raised. In your own becoming.

I did have an imaginary brother named "Kevin" as a child. This seemed like a good starting point for the project. But when I started taping, it became clear that nobody remembered much about him. There was a general amnesia about Kevin. I was interested in the moment Kevin disappeared, or when I stopped talking about him. My parents couldn't remember. It pissed me off. His disappearance seemed really important. I thought they should have been paying attention. But of course that's my own self-centered perspective.

So instead we started working with pure fiction, making up stories about a little boy named Kevin. It eventually became clear that wasn't working either. The stories lacked any kind of spark. So finally I said, "Let's talk about something I did as a child and use the name 'Kevin.'" It was funny. As soon as we changed my name to "Kevin" it was quite liberating for both my parents, and especially for my mother. All of a sudden she started telling all of these terrible stories. I guess she couldn't have attributed them to me, but once it was somebody named "Kevin" it was ok to talk about anything.

I think it was one of those projects where you encounter so many dead ends but somehow you eventually find the direction where you should have been headed in the first place.

While filming I heard two separate stories in the news about children who had somehow managed to get in the family car and drive away. The one that stuck in my mind was a five-year-old boy who had woke up in the middle of the night and got the keys to a car parked in the driveway. He managed to get behind the wheel and drive several blocks before the police apprehended him. They thought it was a drunk driver because of the way he was swerving back and forth across the road. They were shocked to discover that it was a little boy. When they asked him what he was doing, he told them that he was going to the store to get some Fruit-Loops.

That Kevin's escape from his family would be accomplished by just getting in the car and driving away seemed so perfect and simple. I wish it were that easy. The ending of the piece was really important for me. I wanted it to be a complete break from everything that happened before. It's the entire song and people have complained about it being too long. But it's about moving into another space, one that is more evocative than narrative. It signals a shift rather than a conclusion.

MH: I'm wondering why you worked so hard to erase any moment of your parent's intimate lives, you are family after all, and this home movie is set inside their home. Did you feel you would be betraying them by showing who they "really were," or perhaps there is some larger secret which must be kept, the secret which arrives with every camera and every picture?

MM: I don't think I worried about betraying my family by revealing too much. But because they are family I was conscious about not depicting them in a way that they might be uncomfortable with. In the end though, the decision not to allow them to speak about themselves was a way to define who they were through Kevin. It also put the emphasis on how they addressed the camera (me), which is really the sub-text of the piece. Secret is a good word. A picture that doesn't hide more than it reveals is not that interesting.

Having Coffee With No One

MH: This movie opens with an empty chair and a siren, a promise but also a broken date (and a portent of catastrophe, a distant unglimped difficulty). Is every movie like a date? Could it ever be that private, that small, is it perverse to imagine that this movie (or any movie really) could be just for one person, for me? Your movie goes on to show scores of waiting tables, with the same empty chair waiting, always waiting. Where are all these tables? You show us an image of the good life, a travelogue of cafes, but something is palpably missing, displaced.

MM: I don't think it's perverse to imagine that a movie could be just for one person. I think I always write with one person in mind. This video is a very intimate letter to one particular person. Other people can listen in if they like. Or pretend that I'm speaking to them, or that they are the one writing the letter. I think we always identify with multiple positions in a film.

The cafés are in Paris. I was at the Paris Studio, working on another video, when I shot this tape. It was a little side project, something to get me out of the studio. In the end though, *Having Coffee with No One* was the only tape that I finished. I abandoned the other, longer piece.

There is something more solitary about cafés in Paris. It's not like hanging out in a Starbucks, I don't think people in Paris meet for coffee in the same way that they do here. There is a social scene, the scene around the bar and the neighbourhood aspect of cafés, but somehow it's different, and solitary is the only way that I can think to describe it. Or maybe that was just my perspective as an outsider.

I have a very old, clunky video camera, one of the first digital video cameras ever made. It looks like a still camera. So it was very easy to set it down on a table and record. People just thought I was a tourist taking a break from sightseeing. After walking for an entire morning the cafés were a moment to sit and be alone. But I was never really alone. Is anyone ever alone? We're always thinking of someone. There is always that presence or ghost beside us. I emphasized "No One" in the title, because the "No One" is obviously someone.

MH: In its one note insistence, art as permanent refrain, this is a movie that might once have been dubbed structural, owing to its pre-determined shaping strategy. This strategy signals a departure from your other work (doesn't it?).

MM: Yes, this tape is a departure from my other work. I like thinking about it as being structural, and I would love to make more like it. I've shown it to a few people and halfway through, they asked if this was really my film. I guess it seemed so different from anything I'd done before.

I enjoyed the fact that the piece had a very tightly defined framework. Once the framework is in place, you go about fitting all the pieces into it. You've got your boundaries and once you've reached them, the piece is done. It's finished. The tape is what it is, nothing more, nothing less. There's no agonizing over it. There's a kind of freedom to working that way.

MH: Is the self only completed, or realized, in the presence of someone else?

MM: I think so. But I think it can also be completed in the "imagined" presence of someone else. But maybe I don't need to qualify that, maybe that goes without saying. If I could sum it up though, I think that is what all my work has often been about—completing oneself through an imagined presence.

MH: A series of inter-titles changes the café mood. "I have this image in my mind. Your hand is resting on my chest and my face is buried in your neck. I'm not sure if this qualifies as a sexual fantasy but it's the only thing that comes to mind and we don't get any further than that. I don't want to see us together like this any more. It's too disturbing." What does this title mean: "I don't want to see us together like this anymore"? And why the text insert?

MM: The text is actually very literal. I don't want to see us together "like this," i.e. together as we are in this tape. Me here, you in my head. I don't want to be stuck in this impasse. It's too disturbing.

Why the text insert? I guess I didn't know how to communicate this thought without text. I wish I did. I wish the initial pictures said it all and that the final video was just a series of empty chairs. I've always preferred silent films.

MH: The text arrives as an afterthought, and as a reflection on the image. Why this mode of address (which once again restrains or represses any notion of the body)? If we saw a body, or part of one (like a hand for instance) would that ruin everything? Are pictures made only to make up for what isn't there? By extension, personal deficiencies become the crucible of art making—do you feel this? If you were unhappy would you make more work? If you were perfectly content, would there be any need for pictures?

MM: If we saw a body, even a fragment, it would ruin it. The missing body is so important in this tape. I've only ever loved missing bodies, really. Isn't that how it works? Isn't love constructed through absence and longing?

If pictures are made to make up for what isn't there, then I suppose there is a kind of perversion to this work, because I'm photographing an actual absence. Freezing it in that state and forcing it to remain absent.

I hate thinking about whether I would make art if I were happy. It's so hypothetical and I can't really imagine ever being perfectly happy. Personal deficiencies are usually my initial impetus, but after that it gets complicated. I make work for lots of reasons. Lately, I feel like I'm still making videos out of habit. It's what I do. That sounds terrible. That making art is just habit, rather than anything more important. But maybe it's ok. If it were too weighty I'd feel paralysed. So I keep putting out these little things and hopefully there is some relevance to them.

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