



Me Plus Ultra - Marina Vishmidt

"In a survey of the female population of the Ohio countryside, a three-quarters majority of women touched their faces and eyes when asked which part of their body contained their 'self.' The remainder touched their hands, hips, bellies, or bottoms, while a small percentage of women touched other people or animals or simply grabbed the air." Ben Marcus, "The New Female Head"

1. This multi-screen video semi-durationaly depicts a woman getting her nails done in a Brixton nail parlour, a woman getting a personalised perfume, a woman finding out about makes and models of dentures, and a woman getting a brain scan. The mutability and elusiveness of identity as enacted in cosmetic and medical rituals. I attempt to document the uninflected 'proto-time' that elapses in these rituals, the boredom of having something done to you punctuated by bursts of ambient activity, and all the gazes that clash and diverge on the plane of the video ("Nails"). Or the process as quasi-therapeutic coaxing of truths to the surface ("Perfume"). Or as a slightly dodgy transaction ("Teeth"). The project overall looks at how extensions to the self are overcoded as revelatory of the self. In the main, this is illustrated by narcissistic consumer rituals that purport to discover the real you through the logic of the supplement, i.e. customisation, micro-marketing; processes which hearken back to an aristocratic age of personalized services, now inverted to mass-produce individuality - another avatar of new nature, historical conflict recuperated as luxury item. Also the strange intimacy that springs up between client and personal service provider.

I have intentionally stayed on the surface of these products and relations to problematise their mundanity. The subject searches for a self. The camera searches for a subject. From the fingertips via the nerves to the brain.

2. I was investigating the compulsion to choose, and the futility of choice. In the sense that the precipitate of your consumer choices is now more or less your identity in the world. And that consumer choice becomes shorthand for all relations to others, and perceptions of the self come to mimic product development. This would seem to call for a prospecting into the transactive moment, where the slippage between 'you', 'me' and 'it' is proposed and guaranteed, with a selection of possibilities on offer. The subsumption of singularities under the rubric of 'individual choice' seems to mirror the activity of late capitalism in the sectors of local, unique, eccentric . . . customised, the exhaustion of mass production, the production of differences now prioritised over the production of more.

3. I was interested also in several other things: the blandness of these experiences, how there is a consistency across varieties of rituals that pegs them as ordinary and practical, if a touch exotic, forestalling any recognition of their sheer strangeness (though we do see passers-by stopping in the Nails episode, which has been shown in a store window in Copenhagen.) In conjunction with that, I try to locate this mundanity right at the level of the types of conversations had with the service providers and the prevalence of a certain language that neutralises these requests and experiences in a clear paste of bureaucratic expediency, no different in fact from the lingua franca of most professional spheres today. This comes out most distinctly in the interview-heavy segment where I try to find out what kinds of things you can and cannot put into your mouth, "Dentists."

4. The consistency is also central to the "Nails" episode. A regular part of many people's lives, getting their nails done. But it looks so strange from the outside. A liminality that telescopes into fear as we see close-ups of fingers being filed down to dust, sounds reminiscent of an automotive plant, and workers wearing protective masks as if manufacturing weapons of mass destruction. The hybrid of industrial and cosmetic, of medical and glamorous, of vanity and violence, seems to only lay bare their essential intimacy, in a time when radical dualities everywhere merge in a pursuit of greater efficiency.

These processes of exhaustive preparation to present a facade of 'nature', or, more properly, an artificial facade that it is natural for women to present, are far from new. My video tries, though, to incite reflection both on the capacity of these processes to be assimilated (the everyday of the nail salon, the children playing, the bored looking women, the bustling technicians) and the grisly bits that prevent total assimilation (the close-ups), showing how the production of a socialised self is always an ordeal that rewards close scrutiny with revulsion. But is it so simple - the irruptive properties of the strange and the brutal have always inhered in Operation Beauty, and are recuperated in the results.

5. This tension between consistency and rupture runs across the work. There is the frictionless activity of narcissism in culture, the female-targeted semiotics of 'pampering' and 'me time,' the paradoxical injunction to escape from the grinding conditions of objectified life through the right products. Narcissism is read as virtuous, time taken out to smell the roses, to remind yourself of how good it feels not to think about anything- in other words, to re-enact the everyday praxis of alienation, but in a mode of deliberate self-absorption. The

dominance of the culture of therapy, how self-enhancement is deemed the only solution to all types of conflicts and contradictions. The normative lie. And yet there remains a countervailing possibility in 'me time,' a more critical variant of self-exploration potentially available in the dragging time of rituals designed to feed the constructed consumer self. This is time to think, as well as time to relax. The very nature of these rituals seems predicated on such an axis of opposition - full participation presupposes a reflective distance. Sleep with one eye open.

6. But the fascination of feeling yourself suspended between different colours of nail varnish, the magical thinking - will I really be more myself if I buy this? If I become this? How far can this transformation go? It is a dematerialised self, a self cut off from avenues of realisation in the world, that seeks to come back into being through the occult algorithms of the prosthetic. Yet the plasticity of the self exceeds every attempt to define it through external means.

7. Also the erotics in the depersonalised personalising moment - the abstract intimacy, the professional attention of the nail technician, the hairdresser, the dentist, the perfumer - it is almost like an apotheosis of the generality of social relations as posited by capitalism. If the lynchpin of intersubjectivity is self-interest, then a little small talk and a personal service is probably the most succinct illustration of what we expect from any human interaction.