




(above) *every face on Vanity Fair's Hollywood covers 1995–2008, 2009*, stills from 2-channel HD video, infinite loop
(fold-in panel) *The passage of indeterminacy in the intensification of being*, 2011, still from HD video, 48:49 minutes
(cover) *The passage of indeterminacy in the intensification of being*, 2011, still from HD video, 48:49 minutes

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Portraits
Daniel McKewen

METRO ARTS GALLERIES



Portraits

By using close-ups to dramatically intensify the continuity editing of the original footage, Daniel McKewen's screen-based installations open-up spaces for contemplation, where our own role in the consumption of mass mediated imagery is called into question. Rather than being swept up in the narrative of the original footage, we gaze intently at images, which have been obscured by the artist's obsessive use of image tracking. While we stare transfixed, the portraits continue to shift and change, fading in and out, coming closer and yet moving further away, never quite fulfilling our expectations of them. Instead of seeing the 'California Gurl' in "Daisy Dukes, bikinis on top"¹ we view Katy Perry's face close-up in a constant state of flux. Searching for a glimpse of "sun kissed skin"² we are instead rewarded with a portrait of popular culture that is both seductive and grotesque in equal measure. The works installed navigate across a surreal landscape of sound and light, where the territory of pop culture is estranged from our everyday experience of it and the viewer must find their own path (through *Candyfornia*).

McKewen employs elements of intensified continuity editing, in the crafting of all the portraits in the exhibition, which re-frame the existing continuity of pop culture images. This idea of intensified continuity is described by David Bordwell as "... traditional continuity amped up, raised to a higher pitch of emphasis..." where "Mouths, brows, and eyes become the principal sources of information and emotion..."³. This technique of editing, prevalent in filmmaking of the twenty-first century, has been picked up by the artist and pushed to its extremes. So instead of

maintaining or emphasising narrative forms, this process of editing diminishes its importance in the viewer's eyes, which become focused solely on the mesmerizing coalescence of the close-up imagery presented to them.

An important difference between the way intensified continuity is used to edit in film and the way it is employed in McKewen's work is that the shots fade into each other, rather than cutting back and forth. By slowing down the footage to eight percent of its intended speed in *The passage of indeterminacy in the intensification of being* (2011), the original cuts are dramatically lengthened into engrossing vignettes that demand a certain contemplation. Rather than being seamless cuts, this work becomes a fluid, abstract, composition, which blends, shifts and merges one scene into another. The portrait here is always in flux, almost as fluid as pop culture itself, where one beautiful face fades seamlessly and endlessly into the next.

These mediations on popular culture follow on from a rich history of appropriation and re-editing of time-based works in visual art. *The passage of indeterminacy in the intensification of being* particularly appears to acknowledge works such as *Rose Hobart* (1936) by Joseph Cornell, *24 Hour Psycho* (1993) by Douglass Gordon and *Soliloquy Trilogy* (2000) by Candice Breitz. Undoubtedly informed by these works, particularly Gordon's use of time in *24 Hour Psycho* where, "... familiar scenes become unfamiliar and incomprehensible' operating 'outside the normal framework of time"⁴, McKewen's screen-based portraits create spaces where the very seams of pop culture are opened

up to a more critical and scrutinizing gaze: that of the artist and the fan.

McKewen's screen-based installations play with, and unfold over time, revealing unexpected encounters through a continued engagement with their infinite visual loops and ambient soundtracks. It is in the works expanded space of viewing that our position as spectators begins to mirror that of the artist, where we become editors of the works, choosing not only the duration of time spent with each but also the mode of our viewing experience. This mirroring can be seen in the work *every face on Vanity Fair's Hollywood covers 1995-2008* (2010), which is projected onto permeable screens made of sheer fabric. By positioning the two screens in a V shape, we are forced to choose between the images, because although both screens can be viewed simultaneously, each has its own focal point. In viewing this work we are denied the familiarity of cinematic spectatorship⁵ and are instead offered endless possibilities in crafting our own 'wakeful perception'⁶ of the work, which cannot simply be viewed but instead must be experienced.

By reducing the images back to their most basic components, McKewen's screen-based installations aim to seduce the viewer, so as to experience their own unique engagement with these deified images of fandom. His extended portraits do not take the narrative anywhere, but instead return the viewer to their endless creation and proliferation of their making. The contemplative spaces created by this seemingly infinite loop of portraits position the viewer as both complicit

with and critical of the imagery, and asks the question: who are these portraits of idealised beauty being made for? And what is our role in their consumption?

Anita Holtsclaw, June 2011

NOTES

- 1 Capitol Records, *California Gurls*, <http://www.katyperry.com/videos/>, accessed June 10, 2011.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 David Bordwell, 'Intensified Continuity: Visual Style in Contemporary American Film' in *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 55, No. 3, Los Angeles, University of California Press, 2002, 16.
- 4 Stefano Basilio, 'The Editor' in *Cut: Film as Found Object in Contemporary Video*, ed. Stefano Basilio, Milwaukee, Milwaukee Art Museum, 2004, 31.
- 5 Kate Mondloch, *Screens: Viewing Media Installation Art*, Minneapolis, The University of Minnesota Press, 2010, 64.
- 6 Chrissie Iles, 'Between the Still and Moving Image in *Into the Light: The Projected Image in American Art 1964-1977*', ed. Chrissie Iles, New York, Whitney Museum of American Art, 2001, 34.