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Rappolt, Mark. "We Care A Lot," *Art Review*, June 25, 2009.

Art Review

WE CARE A LOT

While it may seem that he's documenting obsessive fan culture and an information-saturated age, Slater Bradley, whose latest videowork premieres at the Whitney this month, actually digs deep into the roots of raw emotion, human relationships and the creation of identity



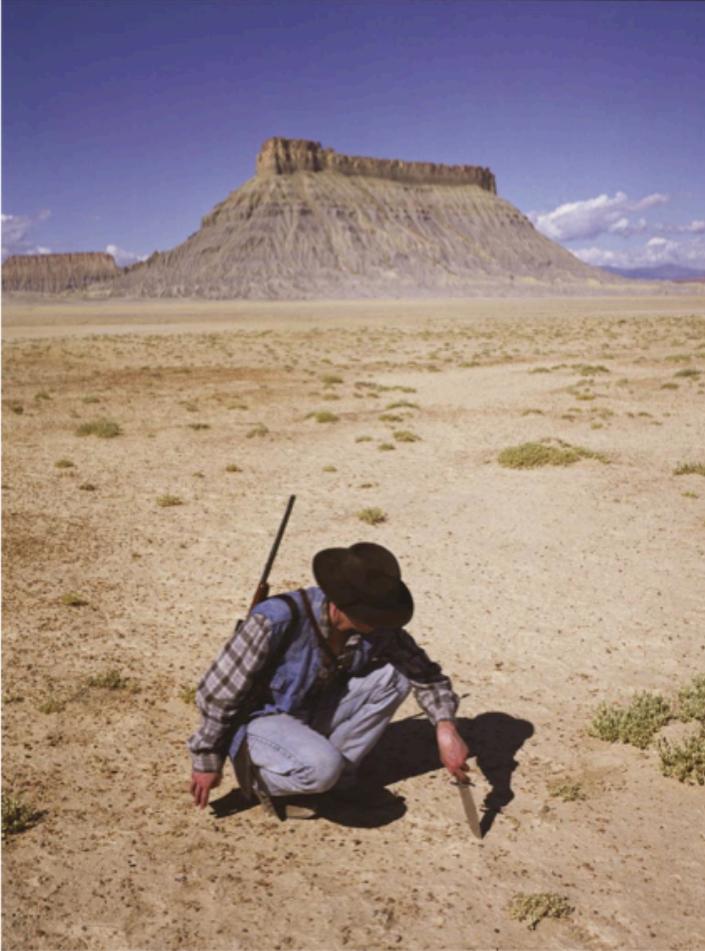
Slater Bradley and Ed Lachmans, *Shadow*, 2009-10 (production still), high-definition video, colour, five-channel surround sound, 13 min 30 sec. Collection of the artists. Courtesy Galería Helga de Alvear, Madrid; Max Wigram Gallery, London; Blum & Poe, Los Angeles; and Team Gallery, New York

25 JUNE 2009. Evening. I'm in London's Soho having dinner with Slater Bradley. The Brooklyn-based artist is in town for the opening of an exhibition at the Max Wigram Gallery centred around a new videowork titled *Boulevard of Broken Dreams* (2009). Like Bradley, a native San Franciscan, the traditional Sunset has been relocated east, to the streets of Manhattan, through which an angst-ridden or perhaps just mentally disturbed youth wanders, occasionally muttering lines from further east still – borrowed from M. Ageyev's *Novel with Cocaine* (1934). In London, however, we're simply waiting for burgers. Just before they arrive, Slater's phone begins to hum – SMS whispers that Michael Jackson has died way back west, in LA. What follows is not a mouthful of beef and relish, but rather a series of feverish attempts to confirm the reports from waiters, fellow diners and various mobile Internet devices. Because celebrity gossip site TMZ, at that point the only outlet carrying the story, was a source neither of us was prepared to designate 'reliable'. And while I'm not now clear as to why we thought having an anonymous waiter confirm the rumour would have, by some strange alchemy, transformed that rumour into fact, it seemed to make perfect sense at the time. In fact everything did. It had been a long time since I'd thought anything at all about Jackson and his various doings. Indeed I'm not sure that I ever had. But there was a certain thrill in this sudden obsession with him and his life. And it involved feeling that I cared about something in a way that could be shared with someone else. Unless, of course, I'm mistaken (or just overly optimistic about myself), and the thrill was simply due to the sudden and sensational manner of MJ's death.

I realise that one thing we might conclude from this brief vignette is that, fundamentally, I'm an uncaring person. Or at best, that in general I don't care enough. I wasn't bothered when Diana died; I went on holiday to miss all the fuss. If I hadn't been with Slater, MJ's death wouldn't have raised much more than an eyebrow and perhaps a mild "oh". And in case you're wondering, the date with which this narrative started wasn't etched into my memory. I had to look it up. In fact, now that I think back on it, perhaps I had succumbed to some sort of derivative of Stockholm syndrome. But let's not make this all about me.

There's no doubt that the process of succumbing is simultaneously one of the key subjects of much of Bradley's work and one of the most basic obstacles to engaging with it. The artist is perhaps best known for his explorations of celebrity adulation as documented in his *Doppelgänger Trilogy* (2001–4), consisting of faked fan-made videos of performances by the suicided singers Ian Curtis (*Family Archives*, 2001–2) and Kurt Cobain (*Phantom Release*, 2003, and the then-alive (if not exactly healthy) Michael Jackson (*Recorded Yesterday*, 2004), all played by Benjamin Brock, an actor selected because of his qualities as Bradley's own lookalike. On the one hand you may think that you were never that interested in Curtis, Cobain or Jackson (you have different tastes) and simply rush on by these works; on the other, Bradley's trilogy rather elegantly, and concisely, unpacks the lure of celebrity and the mechanics of social identification today: Brock, Bradley, celebrity singers, all blending into one another, passing in and out of each other's bodies. It's like watching James Cameron's *Avatar* (2009), except that rather than running around some alien planet, the avatars in these works facilitate our roaming around a planet (as recorded in a YouTube library) that looks and feels exactly like our own.

As in *Avatar*, in which humans use avatars in order to get close to and examine an alien race, Bradley's *Doppelgänger* work examines the ways in which we become close to other people and certain ways in which society's subcultures cohere. My MJ moment, for example. There's a distinct hint of the creepy in all this – as in, say, *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991) or *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), in which faceless or alienated psychopaths attempt to find a place in society by creating new 'outfits', literally stepping into their victims' skins. There's a certain level of adulation that flays the 'celebrity' from the venerated individual through a desire for knowledge of the obscure, mundane or trivial detail of their lives. The term *doppelgänger* is, in its folklore roots, intrinsically related to deception and evil. And understandably the talk at that Soho dinner table quickly turned to the possibility that one person present possessed a kiss of death. And to be clear, the owner of that potentially lethal smooch wasn't me.



The dead return in Bradley's latest video, *Shadow* (2009–10), a collaboration with cinematographer Ed Lachman that references the film *Dark Blood*, which starred River Phoenix and was unfinished at the time of the actor's death, in 1993, and has never seen the light of day. Lachman was *Dark Blood*'s director of photography (something of a legend in his own right, his recent films include *I'm Not There*, 2007, and *Howl*, 2010). *Shadow* sees Boulevard... (and Brock) transported to Utah. Where in *Boulevard...* the central character, dressed in urban chic, wanders through crowded streets, in *Shadow* he's dressed like a cowboy and wandering through an abandoned desert town. And naturally shades and shadows are what really populate the place. Not simply as a result of Lachman's lighting but also in the presence of ghost figures, a scene in which Brock flicks through photographs of Phoenix on the set of *Dark Blood* and in the form of Brock/ Phoenix's dog, called *Shadow*, who dies in the only fragment of *Dark Blood* to be found on YouTube. It's hard not to think of Lachman as looking for auguries among the eviscerated town's scattered entrails. The sense of haunting is certainly present when Lachman, speaking at a preview screening of the work, recalls the final scene he shot back in 1993. A

version of Lachman's comments, currently posted on the River Phoenix: Beautiful Angel website, reads thus: 'We did ten takes of the soliloquy, the last day we shot with him on *Dark Blood*. It was in the cave... all lit by candles. After the last take, I didn't turn off the camera. When we saw the dailies, for ten seconds River was in front of the camera, just a silhouette lit by ambient light. It was... eerie. People were crying. We knew it was the last we would see of River.' This tracing of signs and symbols in footage that perhaps includes none is, I can't help noticing, rather like the way in which one engages with a work like *Shadow*. Particularly if one is not equipped with the *Dark Blood* backstory. In fact, Bradley's latest work introduces a whole new doppelgänger effect. Back when this magazine reviewed *Boulevard of Broken Dreams* (issue 34), writer Martin Coomer noted that Bradley's work seemed to be getting better and better. After seeing *Shadow*, I can only repeat the same.

Slater Bradley and Ed Lachman: *Shadow is on show at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 29 October – 23 January*