New Work: Sylvie Blocher

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This exhibition features two recent video installations by one of France’s most outstanding contemporary artists, Sylvie Blocher, from her series Living Pictures: Je et Nous (I and Us, 2003) and Men in Gold (2007). Men in Gold is a San Francisco–based work that was commissioned by SFMOMA and is making its world premiere. The artist’s video installations touch upon issues that are central to contemporary art practice: singularity, otherness, authority, representation, and memory. In Blocher’s own words, she feels the need to “renegotiate the status of artists” and to reflect “their ethical and aesthetic responsibility.” She believes it is important to enter into a dialogue with people all over the world in pursuit of a “universal local art.”

Taking pictures necessarily involves framing isolated moments in a continuum of time and events. Applying a frame is a prerequisite for being able to focus on a topic or subject. The frame can be physical, as in a painting or a photograph; it may also be conceptual. But framing can be perceived as a practice of exclusion, or even censorship. Why are particular things or topics left out? Or, on a more technical level, why limit our point of view to that of the camera? The authoritarian role of the artist, photographer, or film director in making these choices has thus been subject to much criticism. And artists have, for their part, maintained their rightful claim to subjectivity in portraying people. This inherent conflict of inclusion versus exclusion has been hotly debated since the 1990s by many contemporary artists. To be “in the picture” thus becomes a request for inclusion that affects not only artists, but in consequence also curators and museums.

Blocher has been dealing with these issues since 1992, when she started working exclusively with video in an attempt to avoid the “spectacle” of contemporary art. Whereas other video artists prefer to explore a spirit of collaboration among themselves, she opted very early on to work with people from all social classes and cultural backgrounds. She does not approach her projects with a predefined political agenda. Her motive is more personal: to capture the moment in which an individual not only steps in front of her camera, but actually allows a glimpse into another self, going beyond his or her socially defined role. Blocher calls this the “practice of abandonment.” In fact, her subjects often say after viewing their own enactments that it was not they who spoke or acted.

Blocher is aware that without a frame, a focus, or a selection, nothing would stand out and become visible. Nothing would, in other words, be a “picture” in the first place. This picture can be a moment such as a snapshot, frozen in time, or it can be the filmic framing of an event. Blocher has worked with both models. One thing she does not do is create fiction. There is certainly an acute sense of a stage, given the studio setting and artificial

backdrop, but whoever steps in front of the camera does so of his or her own free will. There is no casting; all volunteers are accepted, and the play is determined by the players alone. The director-artist is not even behind the camera. She steps aside and lets the people address an imaginary other.

Maybe that is why she calls these pictures Living Pictures, a series of projects centered on local groups that she initiated in 1992. Blocher films her subjects one at a time in a single take, then cuts and edits the segments into a compilation, creating a group portrait out of individual encounters. What is it that unites preeminent physicists at CERN, the European Organization for Nuclear Research in Geneva (The Meditation Room, 2001); Princeton University’s football team (Are You a Masterpiece?, 1999); and residents of Paris (Je et Nous), Buenos Aires (Dignidad, 2003), Santiago (La Bandera, 2003), and New Orleans (What Belongs to Them, 2003)? They might or might not know one another, and in any case they are related only by an arbitrary factor. They form, in Blocher’s words, a faux groupe, or “fake group.” Although they do not necessarily have in common the same background, ideas, or upbringing, they share with us their individuality, their dreams, their hopes, and their frustrations. Blocher’s tightly framed, frontal portraits concentrate on their dignity as carriers of their own voices.

“Who is in control of my image?” “Am I being exploited by the artist for a personal vision?” These questions need to be addressed openly in order to gain the confidence of those who volunteer. And each time, a Living Pictures production involves commitment and a true sense of collaboration on both sides. For Je et Nous, Blocher filmed one hundred inhabitants of the Sevran district of Beaudottes, a northern suburb of Paris. The marginalized neighborhood is associated with ethnic as well as economic tensions. She asked each subject to select a phrase with which he or she would address an imagined cameraperson. The people stand in front of a monochromatic backdrop and wear black T-shirts inscribed with personal statements (“I dream of having identity papers,” “I’m ashamed of you,” or “I cannot afford to speak of beauty because I have no money”). They seem to corroborate, complete, and counter one another, piecing together a heterogeneous community from their multiple singularities. This video is Blocher’s personal contribution to a much larger social-practice project by the interdisciplinary collective Campement Urbain (initiated in 1997 and comprised of Blocher, the urban planner François Daune, and the philosopher Josette Faidit). Je et Nous was first shown in the exhibition Zone of Urgency at the 2003 Venice Biennale, and it reflects an ongoing debate surrounding the idea of letting the residents of Beaudottes temporarily “escape” by providing an architectural site for solitude, removed from their neighborhood’s traditional social conventions.

This collaborative discussion surrounding issues of place and
individual needs and concerns continued in the context of La force de l’art, a national exhibition of contemporary art in Paris in 2006.

Blocher’s interest in the construction and constraints of social roles has also led her to explore images of male identity and desire, their ambiguities, and their relation to work. Men in Pink (2001) represents a gay men’s choir, and her most recent piece, Men in Gold, features the Bay Area’s most elite entrepreneurs. Many of them have moved here from elsewhere in the country or the world with technological, social, or economic ideas that may shape our future society. Blocher regards this area as one of the last remaining strongholds of a specifically American utopia—a place that still allows the American dream to come true—comprised of visionaries, capitalists, programmers, and businesspeople who believe in taking risks. After the California gold rush of the nineteenth century and a second (albeit short-lived) dot-com gold rush in the late 1990s, it is easy to believe that there might be more such booms yet to come. The recent sale of YouTube.com is just the latest of these phenomenal local stories.

Men in Gold presents another of Blocher’s so-called fake groups—this time a group of contemporary “gold diggers.” But the artist is less interested in representing their successes than in getting a glimpse of their private sides—the individual passions, dreams, and anxieties of these often anonymous and low-key players.

Blocher’s search for a “universal local art” has taken her across countries, cultures, and territories. She calls her travels “delightful wanderings,” which implies a profound awareness of and sensitivity to her subjects. Her perceptive gaze allows us access to otherwise-elusive moments when we are confronted with a gesture, a silence, or a word and recognize it as a moment of rare truth. Whether the person we are watching is poor or rich, a foreigner or a neighbor, a physicist or a football player ultimately becomes irrelevant.

Rudolf Frieling
Curator of Media Arts

Notes
1. This and all other quotes by Sylvie Blocher are excerpted from an interview between the artist and Hou Hanru in the catalogue Sylvie Blocher: Living Pictures and Other Human Voices (Arles, France: Actes Sud; Luxembourg: Casino Luxembourg, 2002).
Sylvie Blocher was born in France and now lives and works in the Parisian suburb of Saint-Denis. She studied fine art and art history at the University of Strasbourg, France, and has worked as an artist since the early 1980s. In 1997 Blocher founded the interdisciplinary collective Campement Urbain with the architect and urban planner François Daune. Campement Urbain was awarded the Evens Foundation Prize for Community Art Collaboration in 2002 for their proposal for the public project Je & Nous. In 1995 Blocher received the gold medal at the 18th Alexandria Biennial, Egypt.

Blocher’s solo exhibitions have included Sylvie Blocher: Living Pictures and Other Human Voices, Casino Luxembourg, Forum d’art contemporain (2003); Dignidad, Museo de Arte Moderno, Buenos Aires (2003); Three of Us, La Chaufferie, Strasbourg, France (2001); Them(selves), Art Gallery of York University, Toronto (1998); Warum ist Barbie blond?, Kunstraum Düsseldorf, Germany (1996); Sylvie Blocher, Centre International d’art Contemporain, Montreal (1996); and NOUS, Fonds Regional d’Art Contemporain, Marseille, France (1995).

She has also participated in numerous group exhibitions, including Nowhere, 51st Venice Biennale (2005); BEYOND: An Extraordinary Space of Experimentation for Modernization, Second Guangzhou Triennial, China (2005); XI Triennale-India, Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, New Delhi (2005); Nouveau Techno, Contemporary Arts Center, New Orleans (2004); Mirrional Returns: Marcel Duchamp and 20th Century Art, National Museum of Art, Osaka, Japan (2004); VI Bienal de Video y Nuevos Medios, Museo de Arte Contemporáneo, Santiago (2003); Phantom der Lust, Neue Galerie Graz am Landesmuseum Joanneum, Austria (2003); Sense of Wonder, Herzliya Museum of Art, Israel (2001); Signatures of the Invisible, London Institute (2001, traveled to Centre d’Art Contemporain, Geneva; PS.1 Contemporary Art Center, Long Island City, New York); Voici. Cent ans d’art contemporain, Palais des Beaux-Arts, Brussels (2000); Sporting Life, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney (2000); and Insistent Memories, Samuel P. Harn Museum of Art, Gainesville, Florida (2000).

Blocher’s work resides in several public collections, including the Musée d’Art Moderne Grand-Duc Jean, Luxembourg; Herzliya Museum of Art, Israel; Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst, Antwerp, Belgium;Centre Pompidou, Paris; Fondation Cartier, Paris;Fonds Regional d’Art Contemporain, Burgundy, France; Musée des Arts Contemporains, Hornu, Belgium; and Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.

Works in the Exhibition

Je et Nous (I and Us), from the series Living Pictures, 2003
Single-channel color video installation with sound, 50 min.
Courtesy the artist

Men in Gold, from the series Living Pictures, 2007
Two-channel color video installation with sound
Commissioned by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, courtesy the artist and Art & Public, Geneva.