speakingparts

Steve Lovett

The following is an edited interview between Steve Lovett and myself, produced to coincide with his exhibition speakingparts at First Draft Gallery in Sydney, from February 10 to 28, 1999. The same exhibition is to be viewed at the Fisher Gallery in Auckland, as well as other public galleries in New Zealand. *speakingparts* is an exhibition that integrates sound and image. It consists of a number of ëportraití photographs of varying format and dimensions, and recorded interviews played from speakers positioned between the images and the wall. In each of the photographs and the voice track, the faces and speech of several people are layered on top of each other. As a result individual faces and voices are only ever partly distinguishable, and often merged. *speakingparts* is a complex work that comments on many issues relating to art and society generally. We discuss some of these, focusing particularly on issues related to representation and identity. This includes - the relationship between representation, violence and identity; the object/subject binary of representation; the role of the viewer; the representational bias of archives; and technology. Emphasis is placed on the strategies employed by the artist in *speakingparts* to deal with the issues central to his concerns.

Mark Kirby

Mark Kirby. Representation is a central theme of your work. In earlier conversations we have discussed Edward Said's ideas that representation is implicitly violent'. That is, he is concerned about the process of representation as the artist takes charge of interpreting and imaging the identity of his or her subject. We have also discussed the idea that representation is something that can only ever be attempted, and never successfully achieved. This is because the final image is mediated, first by the artist's sensibilities and then, as Roland Barthes has pointed out in his essay *Death of the Author* (1968), as the viewer reinterprets the author's interpretation.
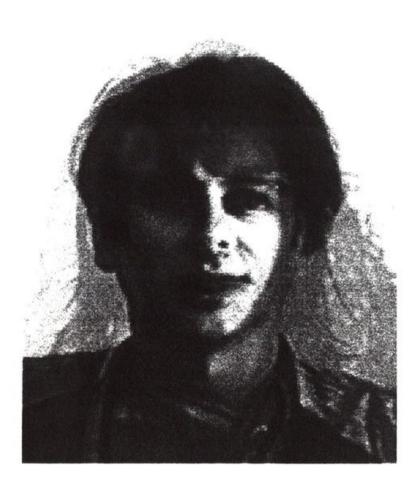
Steve Lovett. To represent something I must distance myself from that which is being represented, whether this is a person, object or environment. I must work to establish a subject-object split, with all of the implications of domination that that implies[ii]. There are two different subjects in a representation - there is the analysed, interpreted and passive subject, which in a portrait is the sitter; and there is the analytical, interpretive, aggressive subject, which is the artist. Ignoring what Barthes says about the viewer for the moment, the most important subject or ego in any image, is not the sitter, but the artist. Essentially, to call the sitter a subject is something of a misnomer, as they become the object of the artist's representation. The smoothness of the final image, as Said points out, disguises the violence of the process of representation, whereby the artist wrestles control over the identity of their sitter, as they turn them from subject into object.

My interest in representation comes from my concern with identity. For some time an issue in my work has been the mechanisms that constrict identity within sets of binary oppositions - male/female, black/white, heterosexual/homosexual, et cetera, and why and how these are constructed.[iii] Like many others, I believe identity to be something which is dynamic, non-fixable and unknowable.[iv]

I attempt to short circuit traditional representational paradigms by collapsing the subject-object binary. I try to give the sitters of my images a voice in their imaging, rather than them just being the object in my representation. So in *speakingparts* I facilitate a dialogue with the sitters, and include recordings of our conversations as part of the final piece. I undertake the same process with the images, which are produced and exhibited in negotiation with the sitter also. This is not a new strategy, but it is important as it is gives the sitters some control over how they are presented to the public.

I am not suggesting that any form of essence is documented in *speakingparts*, though some may be fooled to think the opposite, just that the voice track provides a strong *sense* of each sitter. It is a

way of overcoming the fracture between object and subject. In this way the work is aggressive, as the sitters assert a presence as individuals within their representation. There is the evidence of their voice, accent, mood and manner, all of which provides primary insights into them as individuals, which the viewer will find hard to ignore.

However, although the tapes are presented complete, our analysis is interrupted by the fact that not everything can be heard. Each recording is mixed into and over the other, according to the aesthetics of sound, what is being said, and what each sitter has determined to be too private for complete public knowledge. Thus, the information that is available is mediated by the systems that I have set in place. The result is a form of archive that plays up its own incompleteness.

MK. There is an interesting idea, which partly contradicts Roland Barthes' argument in *Death of the Author*, that suggests that the viewer can become an object of representation merely by looking empathically at an art work. For example Mieke Bal examines the potential for a Museum visitor, concerned to sympathise with the position of the artist so as to understand the work or to appear an expert, to submit their own views to the artist's representation.[v] The viewer it seems, slips between subject and object. The innocent tendency to empathise with an image is present when watching a film, reading a book, and watching the news. It is part of our social fabric.

SL. In *speakingparts* I play with this predicament of the viewer as simultaneous subject and object. This is one aim of the recordings, to make the viewer aware of the existence of the sitter as a central subject. The fragmentary evidence given to the viewer is an attempt to make empathy difficult for them to achieve, in order to disrupt my representation/objectification of them. At the same time, the ambiguity of the work, the conspicuously deliberate multiple readings, is an attempt to open up the field of response for the viewer, by allowing their minds to become construction sites of

representation. Thus any recognition of identity is provisional on their 'social' interaction with the image. They put the fragments together, as in the sense originally argued by Barthes, and so become a subject too.

So in *speakingparts* there is a dynamic happening between viewer, artist and sitter, and between subject and object. I encourage the viewer to disrupt my role as the central subject, and the sitter's pretence at autobiography. What is hopefully created is an endless flow of potential readings and identities - mine, my sitters and the audiences. This I think is nearer to 'truth' than any closely rendered form of representation. In this way *speakingparts* is more about representation than representing. What is depicted, more than any portrait likeness, are the processes of representation itself.

MK. You have referred to *speakingparts* as an archive, I assume because it documents, visually and orally, people that you know and your interaction with them. You seem to see archives in terms of the same issues of representation and subject-object that we have been talking about. At other times we have spoken about traditional archives as being records that are bestowed as objective and authoritative collections of information. Said and Douglas Crimp among others, have criticised archival systems, highlighting the representational prejudices within museums, libraries, academia, and other collectors and storehouses of knowledge.

SL. Art is often seen in archival terms, as documenting the time in which it was made. The same applies to photography. The interest in archives is because I see them as places where identity is established for us. Archives are very much about representation and objectification. An intention of *speakingparts* is to frustrate the traditional archive, not to present something with an aura of objectivity. I have already said that I intended to produce an archive that plays up its own incompleteness, *speakingparts* is also a counter archive in the way that it developed in collaboration with people. Their involvement with the creation of the images and their willing volunteering of personal 'data' to help me represent them,

explicitly contradicts how an archive is traditionally constructed. The personality and human qualities of *speakingparts* contradicts the coldness of data collected in the absence of the subject in the conventional archive. As such it presents new possibilities for how such documents can be, will be, referenced. Much of this has to do with the nature of oral media, which implicitly carries a lot of ancillary information that becomes available during a narration. By suggesting that 'the media is the message' Marshall McLuhan *(Understanding Media, 1964)* has pointed out how the form of a media dictates what can be said within that media. In essence then, traditional archives are limited by their form, they are represented by their physical structure.

Archives are also represented by the present. I am interested in the idea of a 'continuous present', which basically is the idea that everything is mediated by the contemporary. Nothing can escape the present, even collections which are intended to provide records for the future. They always get referenced according to when they will be revisited. They become remade, recreated according to 'now', whenever that will be. They themselves become an object of representation. This is not new. Duchamp was aware of it when he said that a work of art has a conceptual life of no more than fifty years, then a new critical language will take it over. Archives are Readymades in the full Duchampian sense, as vulnerable to re-contextualisation as any urinal.

MK. Contemporary media is important in archival construction and maintenance. The apparent ability of reproductive technology to 'capture' an essence, by virtue of the fact that something can be made that looks likes something else, gives this media an aura of credibility as an archive, which is problematic. While in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1932) Walter Benjamin wrote about the potential of reproductive technology to upset the aura of the art work, in that essay he seemed not to appreciate the consequences for representation. What has been produced is something which carries with it an aura of objectivity and truthfulness, qualities which Susan Sontag (as in *On Photography*,

1977) has emphasised are false.

SL. As you say, what media such as photography do is allow the production of a visual likeness, which has the benefit for the artist of taking the emphasis off manual rendering skills and emphasising the issues and ideas. But the result is an illusion, which is more bound up in realism than reality. What often is not taken into consideration is the fact that a photograph is as artificial as a painting and that the information it provides is limited.

The inclusion of an oral element in my work recognises this lack within photography. There are interesting historical references here. The narrative basis of my work, the stories that develop around the people in my photographs and in my recordings, has links to narrative based quattrocento art, and preliterate medieval art, where the spoken worked hand in hand with the visual. Marshall McLuhan predicted this type of product would emerge from an electronic society, when he identified structural links between oral and electronic media. However, I hold a lot by Arthur C Danto's argument in *Three Decades After the End of Art* (1994), that art is in a 600 hundred year window of practice which began with the Renaissance. Art became tradeable, and its message trading ability became secondary to its commodity status. It became represented by the paradigm of economics. Perhaps this 'medievalising' in some recent practice is a positive step backwards to an art form with potential as a social force.

[i] "...certainly representation, or more particularly the *act* of representing (and hence reducing) others, almost always involves violence of some sort to the subject of representation, as well as a contrast between the violence of the act of representing something and the calm exterior of the representation itself, the *image*-verbal, visual, or otherwise- of the subject." Edward Said in conversation with Phil Mariani & Johnathan Crary, 'In the Shadow of the West', from Marcia Tucker et all (eds), *Discourses: Conversations in Postmodern Art and Culture*, MIT Press, Cambridge, 1990, p94.

[ii] "In order for the things in this world to become objects for perception, the subject must take distance from itself ... But that moment, even in its slight theatricality, remains subjected to the law which is the law of representation; the distance the subject takes in relation to the object..." Hubert Damisch, as quoted by Mieke Bal, in *Double Exposures, the Subject of Cultural Analysis*, Routeledge, New York, 1996, p181

[iii] Marcia Tucker has stated this very succinctly, in *Discourses: Conversations in Postmodern Art and Culture*, p91, when she writes: "The mythical notion that there is a single identity discoverable 'within' a particular individual or group has been replaced in recent years by the growing understanding that fixed identities are the product of the far from disinterested ways in which we are represented to ourselves and to others."

[iv] As Tucker points out many writers such as Derrida, attempt to ".. posit identity not in terms of binary oppositions" but as 'difference', which is infinite in its variety." ibid p91; which is explained by Christopher Norris, who writes that: "*Difference* ... sets up a disturbance at the level of the signifier (created by the anomalous spelling) which graphically resists ... reduction. Its sense remains suspended between the two French verbs 'to differ' and 'to defer'; both of which contribute to its textual force but neither of which can fully capture its meaning. Language depends on 'difference' since ... it consists in the structure of distinctive oppositions which make up its basic economy. Where Derrida breaks new ground ... is in the extent to which 'differ' shades into 'defer'. This involves the idea that meaning is always deferred, perhaps to the point of an endless supplementarity, by the play of signification." D*econstruction, Theory and Practice*, Metheun, London,1982, p32.

[v] "Flattered by this invitation to share the position of the master, scholars tend to step in and identify with the subject, assuming they see and think themselves what is exposed before them. They relinquish their own subjecthood and vacate the slot of the 'you'." Mieke Bal, *Discourses: Conversations in Postmodern Art and Culture*, Routeledge, London, 1996, p181. Bal's book provides insights into the representational nature of narrative methods, from museum displays to poetry, pointing out how knowledge is potentially mediated by the style of the 'story telling'.