

# **Candice Breitz OFF VOICES**

*Off Voices* brings together an expansive selection of works made by Candice Breitz between 1994 and 2020. Curated by Dorothee Duvivier, it is the first major solo exhibition of Breitz's work in the Belgian context. The title of the exhibition most literally describes voices that are not visibly attached to an on-screen individual or character. As a narrative device frequently used in television or film production, an 'off voice' most commonly serves to give viewers access to the inner thoughts of an on-screen character, providing information that might otherwise remain inaccessible.

Beyond screen life, on the other hand, a voice that is described as 'off' is one that cannot be heard, or – more ominously – one that has been silenced, as is so often the case for those who are marginalised or repressed. In a media-saturated society that is bursting with opinions and dense with the voices of those who are most visible, silence is too often misperceived as indicative of absence or failure. The ongoing stifling of the voices of those who are most precarious and/or vulnerable among us, serves not only to violently undermine their presence in our presents, but also to obliterate their personal and collective histories. Across Breitz's oeuvre, she asks whether and how such silences might be broken; how it might be possible to amplify the voices of those who are typically consigned to the shadows and to anonymity.

Collectively, the works presented in *Off Voices* offer an expanded reality – one that accommodates narratives that are at once personal and political, weaving elements drawn from lived experience with fictional propositions – to point

to a possible future in which a broader range of subjects might come to voice. *TLDR*, for example, prominently features the testimonies of sex work activists who have for years fought to end the stigmatization and decriminalization of their labour. Via an archive of interviews, this community brazenly questions societies in which categories such as race and gender have been weaponised in the service of power. Within the body of work that is on view at BPS22, Breitz openly thematises her own privileged position within such societies, pointing a finger at herself to bluntly ask whether and how artists living comfortable lives can succeed in amplifying calls for social justice. In works such as *Ghost Series* and *TLDR*, she grapples with the systemic relationship between whiteness and visibility, directing our attention towards the micro and macro violences that almost inevitably attach to privilege.

Rather than offering simplistic or dogmatic conclusions, the works assembled in *Off Voices* open up space for reflection and negotiation, offering visitors new filters through which to observe and consider the complex ways in which we are each positioned, as individuals, in relation to the many others who we encounter both directly and virtually within the media landscape and the world at large.

**Curator:** Dorothee Duvivier

# TLDR

2017

Salle  
Pierre Dupont  
& Grenier

13-channel video installation, sound, colour

Duration: 60 minutes, loop

Commissioned by the B3 Biennial of the Moving Image, Frankfurt

Courtesy: Goodman Gallery (London) + KOW (Berlin)

*TLDR* was produced in dialogue with members of SWEAT (the Sex Workers Education & Advocacy Taskforce) in Cape Town, South Africa.

In the first room of *TLDR*, a 12-year-old narrator occupies the central screen of a three channel projection. He recounts a true story from the recent past, vividly evoking an ideological battle that pitted feminists against feminists, and human rights organisation Amnesty International against an awkward coalition of prominent Hollywood actresses and sex work abolitionists. A Greek chorus composed of eleven sex workers responds to the story as it unfolds, offering their commentary via slogans drawn from the history and present of sex work activism, a range of props inspired by the opinion-saturated vernacular of social media, and songs of protest drawn from the South African repertoire.

In 2015, Amnesty International announced its intentions to start campaigning for the worldwide decriminalisation of sex work, the aim being to protect sex workers by

providing them with a legal framework. A simple enough idea, but one that was immediately met with vehement resistance from conservative activists, who managed to win over a cadre of Hollywood celebrities to protest Amnesty's campaign. *TLDR* – a social media acronym that stands for 'Too Long, Didn't Read' – suggests that the privileged actresses who chose to sign a viral petition that rejected Amnesty's thoroughly researched proposal, were unlikely to have taken the time to read that proposal. At the core of *TLDR*, is a critique of star power, and of the very real damage that was done to an international human rights campaign due to the interference of a lobby of influential but ignorant white feminists who were able – given their outsized media platforms and white saviour mentality – to take up far too much space in a debate that they were barely qualified to comment upon. The work invites reflection on the relationship between whiteness, privilege and visibility; as well as on the shrinkage of attention spans within a clickbait media economy that fetishizes celebrity.

*TLDR* continues upstairs, where visitors are invited to spend time with a series of intimate documentary interviews, via which the first-person testimonies of the same community of sex workers can be heard. The interviewees offer frank comment on their labour, describe the socio-political conditions under which they found their way into sex work, and articulate their political goals as activists.

Before encountering these spoken testimonies (which add up to approximately eleven hours of viewing), one passes through an archival space that displays the costumes and props that were made for *TLDR* in collaboration with the SWEAT community. The archive includes a series of posters from SWEAT's #SayHerName campaign, which pays tribute to sex workers who have faced violent deaths.

*TLDR* is dedicated to the memory of Nokuphila Kumalo, a young sex worker who was murdered by artist Zwelethu Mthethwa in Cape Town in 2013.

## The work features interviews with:

Zoe Black (00:34:42)  
Connie (01:07:18)  
Dudzile Dlamini (01:18:40)  
Emmah (01:08:51)  
Gabbi (01:28:28)  
Regina High (01:17:19)  
Jenny (01:09:19)  
Jowi (01:02:49)  
Tenderlove (01:12:40)  
Nosipho 'Provocative' Vidima (00:45:57)

Narrated by Xanny 'The Future' Stevens

# Ghost Series

1994-1996

Mirador

Ten photographs  
101,5 x 72 cm each  
Courtesy of Studio Breitz

The *Ghost Series* was produced by Candice Breitz at the age of 22, soon after she left Johannesburg to study in the United States (and directly after the historic elections that took place in South Africa in 1994, ending the apartheid era).

The photographs originate from a series of South African tourist postcards that Breitz has altered using white correction fluid (better known as Tipp-Ex). The blunt layer of white-out applied to the postcards polemically reproduces the violence and erasure that black South Africa had for so long endured under the apartheid regime, leaving behind a series of ghostly figures whose spectral absence testifies to the ongoing and haunting consequences of apartheid. The layer of bony whiteness projected onto the postcards at the same time hints at the extent to which white fantasies about an exotic and rural Africa (fantasies that tend to conveniently suspend the continent in the past), have served to distract from the vibrant contemporary reality of the continent. Looking at the series, the recently-coined English term 'ghosting' comes to

mind – one that millennials use to refer to an abrupt withdrawal into silence as a means of ending a conversation or relationship (a tactic that can be understood as an expression of power).

The original postcards from the *Ghost Series* are preserved in the collection of Tate Modern in London. The series of photographs shown here – which were produced by rephotographing and enlarging the postcards – further exaggerate the ghostly resonance of the smaller works. When hung on a gallery wall, the whited-out bodies featured in the photographs read as cut-outs that are continuous with the gallery's white walls, implying a continuity between the racist discourse that is perpetuated by postcards such as these within the tourist economy, and the residual presence of such discourse within the cultural institutions and museum collections of countries such as South Africa or Belgium, contexts in which the colonial past still looms large.

The *Ghost Series* generated strong criticism when it was first exhibited. Some critics insisted that the work

was an expression of racist prejudice. One writer described the making of the work as an act comparable to ethnic cleansing. Others have defended the series, assessing it in light of the artist's long-standing commitment to analysing and challenging white privilege (including her own). The wall texts displayed opposite the *Ghost Series* offer insight into some of the responses that the work has received since 1994.

Some thirty years later, this early work – and the public reception it garnered – remain at the foundation of Breitz's thinking as an artist. They serve, within this exhibition, as a footnote that looks back to the artist's beginnings, while offering retrospective insight into later works such as *TLDR* or *Profile*. On the occasion of this exhibition, BPS22 invited Breitz to share her reflections on the *Ghost Series*, in the form of a short essay. The essay is exhibited alongside the works in the exhibition and can also be found next pages.

Made as I was leaving Johannesburg to study in the United States – directly after the historic elections that took place in South Africa in April 1994, elections that marked the end of the apartheid regime, but not of the long shadow of apartheid – the *Ghost Series* is the earliest work that I continue to exhibit. Offering a jarring point of entry into my artistic practice, three decades later the series can best be described as the sincere yet unsophisticated attempt of a very young artist to consider the weight of her own privilege as a white South African. I was 22 years old at the time the works were made.

In making the *Ghost Series* – via the application of correction fluid (better known as Tipp-Ex) to a selection of the kind of ethnographic postcards that were still being voraciously consumed by white tourists in the mid-1990s – I was searching for a language that would allow me to reflect on the violence that is inherent to whiteness and, in particular, on the glaring blind spots that are characteristic of the white gaze. The works were critiqued by some, when they were first exhibited, as reiterating the very modes of erasure that I had hoped to call into question. The purpose of continuing to exhibit the *Ghost Series* is not to refute or reject such observations, but to acknowledge the manner in which a perspective (my own, in this case) is always shaped and limited – and at times, severely compromised – by the positionality of the perceiving subject (me, in this case). The *Ghost Series* has come to haunt my body of work, for better and for worse. I took a decision not too long after the *Ghosts* met with fierce debate, that I would not bury or deny these skeletons in my closet but instead carry them with me as a source of productive discomfort. I wanted to remain in critical dialogue with the *Ghosts*.

It was the violent operations of whiteness – the indifference with which whiteness consigns bodies of colour to the past, the obliteration and dehumanisation of racialised subjects as inferior and remote from contemporaneity – that I had hoped

the *Ghost Series* might polemically throw into question. I chose Tipp-Ex because the medium evoked, in my mind, the logic of denial and negation that is at the heart of the condition of whiteness, a condition that I was born into. I wanted the *Ghost Series* to speak to the ways in which whiteness relies on its own purported invisibility to perpetuate dominance and to invisibilize those who it sees as 'other.' By means of the clumsy application of the toxic white fluid to the surface of tourist postcards – souvenirs that were produced by white people explicitly to be consumed by white people – I wanted to insist on the bullying opacity of whiteness, on the material consequences of white supremacy for those who bear its brunt, on the deathliness that undergirds whiteness. I imagined that the unevenly applied correction fluid would over time come to have a bone-like quality, as it gradually yellowed and cracked.

The *Ghost Series* could not do all the work that I hoped it would do. I was, though I had no way of knowing it at the time, at the beginning of a long journey. The *Ghosts* continue to travel alongside me as an artist, for better and for worse – a spectral reminder of how hard it is (perhaps impossible) to fully arrive. I dare to think of their uneasy presence within my oeuvre as a form of defiant resilience in the face of multiple efforts to erase them (including my own). To remove the *Ghosts* from circulation would be to let myself (and others like me) off the hook; to repress the painful yet necessary and urgent conversation that they invite. My ongoing conversation with the *Ghost Series* takes place, in this exhibition, in the awkward self-portrait titled *Profile*, as well as in *TLDR*, the work you've just encountered (both works from 2017). The conversation continues, beyond this exhibition, in works such as *Extra* (2011), *Love Story* (2016) and *Whiteface* (2022).

Candice Breitz  
January 2025

# Profile

2017 Grande Halle

Three single-channel videos, colour, sound, loop:

Variation A: 2 minutes, 20 seconds

Variation B: 3 minutes, 27 seconds

Variation C: 3 minutes, 21 seconds

Commissioned by the South African Pavilion, Venice Biennale, 2017

Courtesy: Goodman Gallery (London) + KOW (Berlin)

*Profile* – a series of three short films that the artist has described as ‘self-portraits’ – is Candice Breitz’s response to being nominated to represent South Africa in the country’s pavilion at the Venice Biennale. Breitz’s fast-moving edit is as earnest as it is irreverent, conflating self-representation with brand promotion, biography with racial profiling, artist statement with political campaign. Rather than appearing before the camera herself, Breitz invited ten prominent South African artists – who could equally have been selected to represent South Africa in Venice – to feature in the work. *Profile* thus deflects the heightened attention that is extended to an artist exhibiting in Venice to a range of fellow artists who, much like Breitz, appear intent on disrupting fixed notions of subjectivity. Collectively, their on-camera statements prompt a series of questions regarding the dynamics of power that are at work in acts of representation, both of the self and of others.

The slipperiness of identity becomes evident as questions of class, gender, religion and race intertwine and truth converges with fiction. Who is speaking

in the name of whom? Sidestepping objectification, the artists featured in *Profile* – in cahoots with Breitz – confront the placatory ‘rainbow nation’ metaphor that is frequently applied to post-apartheid South Africa. In doing so, they broach the question of who may legitimately speak of and for their nation. The question is a particularly fraught one in the South African context, where debates regarding the extent to which white South Africans can engage, portray or stand in alliance with Black compatriots, remain central to public discourse. Can would-be allies whose very being is defined by socio-historical privilege, avoid simply entrenching such privilege as they endeavour to align themselves with those who have been historically disadvantaged? This charged question – which is central to *Profile* – resonates loudly in other works in the exhibition, such as the *Ghost Series* and *TLDR*.

## With South African artists:

Igshaan Adams  
Roger Ballen  
Steven Cohen  
Gabrielle Goliath  
Dean Hutton  
Banele Khoza  
Gerald Machona  
Buhlebezwe Siwani  
Chuma Sopotela  
Sue Williamson

# Digest

2020 Grande Halle

1,001-Channel Video Installation (200 wooden shelves,  
1,001 videotapes in polypropylene sleeves, paper, acrylic paint)

Unique Installation

Produced with support from the Sharjah Art Foundation

Courtesy: Goodman Gallery (London) + KOW (Berlin)

*Digest* draws its inspiration from the legend of Scheherazade, the celebrated storyteller who – according to *The Arabian Nights* (also known as *One Thousand and One Nights*) – was one of the many wives of the powerful sultan, Shahrayar. Directly after their wedding, Scheherazade is locked away by her new husband, who intends to have her put to death the following day. On that night – and on the 1,001 nights that follow – Scheherazade shares a mesmerising story with Shahrayar, intentionally failing, night after night, to reveal how the story ends. Desperate to hear the end of each night's story, Shahrayar postpones Scheherazade's execution again and again, until eventually, after 1,001 nights, he decides to spare her life. Seen by some as a proto-feminist, Scheherazade's ability to generate narrative suspense literally becomes her means of survival within a violent patriarchal order.

Like Scheherazade, *Digest* carries 1,001 hidden stories. Completed over the long months of lockdown during the Covid pandemic, the work – which Candice Breitz describes as 'a multi-channel

video installation' – consists of 1,001 videotapes that have been buried and sealed in plastic video sleeves. The tombstone-like objects are arranged on shallow wooden racks, evoking the aesthetics of a video rental store. The plastic kentia palms that punctuate the installation nostalgically recall the tacky décor that was characteristic of such stores, while at the same time paying sly homage to the Belgian artist, Marcel Broodthaers.

Each of the video sleeves on display within this ghostly video store is meticulously coated in black abstraction and adorned with a single hand-painted verb that has been excerpted from the title of a film that was in circulation during the era of home video. The verb, 'to die,' for example, is sourced from the VHS cover of *Die Hard* (1998), while 'to trek' is sourced from the VHS cover of *Star Trek* (1979). In each case, the *Digest* verb faithfully appropriates and reproduces the typography that was used on the original VHS cover. The infinite number of ways in which the 1,001 verbs might be arranged within the installation, hints at the endlessly

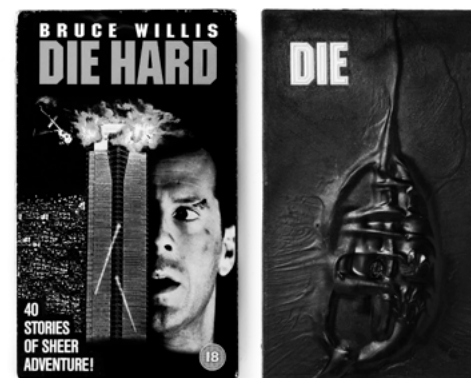
disruptive and subversive potential of narrative (as so skilfully exploited by Scheherazade). In denying us access to the inner contents of the 1,001 video sleeves, Breitz liberates us to weave our own narrative journeys through the installation. She offers us nothing more than the crisply isolated verbs embedded in Rorschach-like black abstraction as our tools of navigation, perhaps supplemented by individual memories of the films that the work catalogues.

Breitz has created a monument to the canon of moving images that has been so central to her own evolution as an artist. Preserving and concealing hundreds of metres of videotape, *Digest* is at once an archive, an inventory and a time capsule that immortalises a now obsolete mode of consuming films. The work spans nearly a century of cinema – from Cecil B. DeMille's silent film *The Cheat* (1915), to the gory horror film *Drag Me to Hell* (2009).

For the presentation of *Digest* at BPS22, Breitz has chosen to display the verb 'labour' on a freestanding pedestal at the point of entry to the work, thus directing

our attention to another installation that is on view in the same space. Titled *Labour*, this second installation – like *Digest* – considers how patriarchal violence might be creatively resisted.

*Digest* (before/after),  
2020



# Labour

2017 Grande Halle

6 Single-Channel Video Installations:

*Labour (PMURT)*, 2017

*Labour (MIK)*, 2019

*Labour (NÁBRO)*, 2019

*Labour (NITUP)*, 2019

*Labour (ORANOSLOB)*, 2019

*Labour (NAĚODRE)*, 2020

Co-produced by the Neuer Berliner Kunstverein

Courtesy: Goodman Gallery (London) + KOW (Berlin)

*Labour* is a series of single-channel video installations. Each consists of footage from an actual birth, captured in raw documentary style by Candice Breitz. The births are installed in semi-circular viewing cabins that are hung with austere grey curtains, in a nod to the peep show aesthetics of Courbet's *L'Origine du monde* (1866) and Duchamp's *Étant donnés* (1966).

*Labour* quickly veers off the documentary path. Rather than presenting each birth in its natural chronology, Breitz has us witness the arrival of each baby in reverse. We observe as each newborn is swept out of its mother's arms, only to be slowly sucked back into the womb.

The work is accompanied by a Matricial Decree, which has been issued – Breitz would have us believe – by the *Secular Council of the Utopian Matriarchat*, a government body that refers to itself, in abbreviation, as S.C.U.M. The document is drafted in bureaucratic English that is simultaneously antiquated and futuristic in style. The Matriarchat, it becomes clear, is a stridently feminist authority that is fiercely committed to reproductive

justice. Its officials practice a zero tolerance policy towards those who do harm to the bodily autonomy of women and others, strictly punishing “eruptions of testosterism” and incidents of “binary extremism.”

Additional clues are provided by the titles of the individual installations in the series. The earliest piece – which is titled *Labour (PMURT)* – was shot only days prior to Donald Trump's first inauguration as US president in January 2017. Other works carry the titles *Labour (ORANOSLOB)*, *Labour (MIK)*, *Labour (NÁBRO)*, *Labour (NITUP)* and *Labour (NAĚODRE)*, a veritable inventory of the early twenty-first century's most callous populist leaders. Each of the barely fictionalised leaders alluded to here – Trump, Bolsonaro, Kim, Orbán, Putin and Erdoğan – must, by order of The Matriarchat, face the most drastic possible punishment. Each is to be ceremonially withdrawn from the world. In this alternate reality, the embodied power that flows through mothers as they give birth, is a resource that the state can tap for corrective purposes, such as the elimination of violent

## Please Note

We would like to point out that *Labour* contains explicit footage of women in labour and giving birth.

Children should be accompanied by a responsible adult when visiting the exhibition.

Photographing and filming the work is strictly forbidden.

Out of respect for the intimate nature of the work, visitors are asked to leave their cell phones and cameras with the security guard who is stationed at the point of entry to *Labour*.

Maximum Capacity: 5 people

individuals who have done wilful damage to the wellbeing of society. The women who selflessly perform the retractions are citizens who have stepped forward voluntarily to protect the broader collective. Their answer to patriarchal violence is bodily resistance. In calling forward an elite squad of agents to courageously volunteer their wombs, *Labour* holds up a mirror to the patriarchal present, in which the instrumentalization of women's bodies is more often than not underwritten by state policy, and in which absurd levels of sacrifice are expected of mothers.

Some will find dark humour in Breitz's proposal, which is as disturbingly dystopian as it is earnestly utopian. This is speculative fiction combined with a feminism that is simultaneously tongue-in-cheek and dead serious. In imagining a world free of the shackles of patriarchy, Breitz joins a long list of feminist thinkers, such as Valerie Solanas (the author of the *SCUM Manifesto*) and Margaret Atwood, whose novel – *The Handmaid's*

*Tale* – depicts a society obsessed with controlling female fertility. Breitz has described *Labour* as “a desperate gesture made in response to desperate times.”



# Babel Series

1999

Entresol

Seven-channel Video Installation

Courtesy: Goodman Gallery (London) + KOW (Berlin)

In the Entresol, the small room behind the black curtain that protects *Labour*, some of the most loved pop stars of the '80s and '90s appear across seven video monitors. The *Babel Series* is Candice Breitz's earliest video installation. It was first exhibited at the Istanbul Biennale in 1999.

The work appropriates fragments of footage from iconic music videos featuring Madonna, George Michael, Grace Jones, Freddie Mercury, Prince, Sting and ABBA. Each of these stolen moments loops endlessly in the space of the installation, creating a cacophonous composition that evokes the bible story from which the work takes its title.

The *Babel Series* reduces language to its most primal building blocks, orchestrating monosyllabic fragments of sound into an aggressively dysfunctional soundscape. Madonna's iconic 'Papa Don't Preach' is cut down to an endless "pa-pa-pa-pa," while Freddy Mercury's vocals from 'Bohemian Rhapsody' are distilled to a monotonous, "ma-ma-ma-ma." George Michael whimpers "me-me-me-me," while Grace Jones in turn

insists "no-no-no-no." The work draws an analogy between the most primal stages of speech acquisition and the steps through which consumers absorb the lingua franca of mass entertainment culture. The artist's reduction of pop music lyrics to nonsense syllables alludes to the manner in which the entertainment industry at times reduces its fans to a state of infantilism.

Amputated from the recognisable sense of their familiar source songs, the sound fragments constituting the *Babel Series* disintegrate language into infantile garble, dragging a pantheon of pop stars back to a pre-linguistic condition that is not too far removed from the reversed cries of the newborn babies in *Labour*.

Candice Breitz was born in Johannesburg in 1972, during the era of apartheid. Throughout her formative years, South Africa was subject to stringent cultural boycotts, via which the outside world sought to put pressure on the country's white supremacist regime. Under apartheid (1948–1994), all forms of media were strictly controlled and intensely censored by the paranoid racist government, as a consequence of which television only arrived in South African homes in 1976. The eventual arrival of domestic video recorders and video rental stores in the early 1980s, provided some respite to South Africans who could afford such luxuries (the majority of whom were white). The relatively easy availability of moving images gradually came to supplement Breitz's obsessive reading habit, inevitably informing and expanding her relationship to the world beyond South Africa. It was not until after she had completed her art education at Wits University in Johannesburg, however, that moving images were to find their way to the centre of her practice as an artist.

Soon after the election of South Africa's first Black president, Nelson Mandela, in 1994 – a moment that marked the beginning of the slow transition towards a post-apartheid future – Breitz was given the opportunity to study in the United States. After completing a degree in art history at the University of Chicago, she spent nearly a decade in New York pursuing a doctorate at Columbia University, before coming to the realisation that it might be possible to live her life as an artist, an option that had seemed remote and utopian until that point. In early 2002, in the wake of the events of 9/11, Breitz left New

York to settle in Berlin. She has lived and worked in Germany for the last two decades.

From her earliest years as an artist, Breitz has focused both on the emancipatory potential and on the threat of repression that she considers inherent to technologies of mass culture, technologies which can be instrumentalised either to reinforce or to challenge social and geopolitical hierarchies. Over the last three decades, her oeuvre – with its strong focus on multichannel video installations and photography – has persistently interrogated and deconstructed popular culture, seeking in particular to consider the dynamics by means of which an individual becomes their self in relation to a larger community, be that the immediate community that one encounters in family, or the real and imagined communities that are shaped not only by questions of national belonging, race, gender and religion, but also by the increasingly undeniable influence of mainstream media such as television, cinema and social media. Most recently, Breitz's work has focused on the conditions under which empathy is produced, reflecting on a media-saturated global culture in which strong identification with fictional characters and celebrity figures runs parallel to widespread indifference to the plight of those facing real world adversity.

Taking the vast repertoire of the culture industry as her starting point, Breitz archives, analyses, filters, dissects, cuts, pastes and reformulates the substance of popular culture, regurgitating it to us in the form of experiences that are both familiar and alien. Her multi-

channel installations reposition us as viewers, inviting us to critically consider the stream of images in which we are increasingly embedded.

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