

# Private: Filming Private lives: From Personal to family identity

By Mathilde Roman

## **Facing the self: the video as mirror**

In the sixties, when technology first allowed the making of films without a crew, artists soon turned to the portrayal of private life. Emerging at a time when social norms and bourgeois ideals were being questioned, video art was decidedly political. The camera documented feminist demonstrations, performances and land art expeditions, and its affinity with existential and feminist questioning made self portraits and personal stories an important part of video art. While autobiography has always flourished in literature, film had not until then offered the solitude that invites self-revelation. Sony's 1965 Portapak camera allowed artists to start using moving images in their work with an autonomy that has only since grown. Digital technology has further hastened the democratization of film by making it accessible to everyone, and by allowing artists to easily edit and manipulate their own footage.

Many video artists use themselves as subjects. Vito Acconci, Peter Campus, Joan Jonas, Gary Hill, Bill Viola in the early days and, more recently, Pipilotti Rist and Pierrick Sorin have all stood in front of the camera and explored themes of self image. They question the role of the viewer and the reflected image; they put their own bodies into play and construct narratives around the position of the self.

Using the self as subject has a practical side: it lets artists move quickly from idea to execution because the actor is available at all times. It also helps artists save on costs. In 1979, in a now famous article, "The Aesthetics of Narcissism," Rosalind Krauss criticized video art for its fundamental narcissism. She argued that the interest in the self in sixties modernist art led to video art that had artists gazing on their own reflection, indulging in introspection and the resulting feelings of loss, duality and vertigo. This autonomous, inexpensive medium encouraged artists to experiment with narcissism, sometimes falling into the trap of isolation. Yet what emerged from these works was a new reflection on the other (primarily the viewer) and on the awareness and construction of self in relation to the world around us. Krauss bases her arguments partly on the work of Vito Acconci, which mostly avoids the lure of narcissism by questioning the position of the viewer in the face of the image. In *Theme Song* (1973), he seeks to win over the viewer by trying to diminish the separation produced by representation. This is a Utopian approach that confronts the viewer with the distance constructed by the image in relation to the world [3].

By using his own body and private life as themes in his work, French artist Pierrick Sorin created a tragicomic persona that appealed to a broad audience. A capable inventor and inveterate dreamer, he displays his lowest leanings alongside his most banal everyday activities. His works are appealing because of their playful construction and the way they involve viewers, often at our own expense. These videos and installations combine humour with a sharpness that is by turns caustic and melancholic. A seminal figure in the so-called hand-made use of visual technology, and interested in making art using the forms of popular culture, Pierrick Sorin plays an anti-hero, recording his everyday life, his comings and goings, his weaknesses. A confirmed bachelor, he receives only one visitor, in the *Jean-Loup* series: his twin brother; his double. His solitude deepens the pathos of the viewer and, because we are the sole witnesses to Sorin's constant flow of stories and confessions, commands our attention and complicity.

In the nineties, the trend towards themes of private and everyday life emerges in French video art, seen in such artists as Joël Bartoloméo, Valérie Pavia, Loïc Connanski and Rebecca Bournigault. By devoting two of its annual exhibitions to the depiction of private life in photography and video (*La scène de l'intime* in

1996 and *Extra et Ordinaire* in 1999), Printemps de Cahors recognized this direction that had been discussed earlier in the catalogues. The artist as subject became a broader trend in video and photographic creation as a means of reflecting the world back in its most banal form. The subjects of the films question their relationship with others and with the society to which they belong (Valérie Pavia in *C'est bien la société*, 1998). They encourage the viewer to become the author of the surrounding images (Loïc Connanski in *La petite vidéo rouge du (sur) commandant Connanski*, 1998). They put private, everyday life on display and explore its narrative capacity. The story unfolds in the interplay between the private and the shared; between the anecdotal and the existential. The quest for self-identity is at the heart of so many works because the face-to-face with one's self that video allows encourages the search for self-definition. As the image evolves over time, the speaking subject weaves the narrative fabric of self, allowing identity to be conceived in full fictional depth. This allows artists to seize the territory of the video as a space for personal metamorphosis through an artistic, aesthetic act. This is not about using video in a psychoanalytical context to treat neuroses [4], but to reflect on the way in which artists play with this.

Which brings us to the work of Milutin Gubash [5]. The artist lives in Canada, where the video scene is particularly vibrant and the portrayal of private life is a theme explored in the work of many artists, including Sylvie Laliberté and Manon Labrecque.

### **The private lives of families**

Milutin Gubash creates videos centred on his own character (or maybe something like “featuring himself as a character.”) But instead of being alone in front of the camera, he also films his parents, his wife and his daughter. His interest in the narrative province of family matters has brought him, over the last 10 years, to work with those closest to him, filming their relationships with an aesthetic that effortlessly combines the burlesque and the absurd. Extracts of his videos and photos are available on his site: [www.milutingubash.com](http://www.milutingubash.com).

*Near and far* (2004) (video) is a series of performances that he filmed with his parents around Calgary, his home city. From the first image it's clear that his approach is far from ordinary. Milutin Gubash doesn't film his parents at home, going about their everyday lives, but instead places them in strange, wordless situations. Instead of choosing his locations on the basis of their emotional charge or a personal memory, he used the locations of various sordid news stories reported in the Calgary Herald (the local newspaper) since 1999 [6]. In each sketch, the artist plays the part of the victim as his parents look on, calm and smiling. In each sketch, he attempts to avoid their gaze. Floating in a river and assuming other suicidal positions, he nevertheless fails to move his parents. The distance between them seems unbridgeable; the son remains fundamentally isolated. When his parents get into a car to leave an underground parkade, he doesn't go with them; yet his absence seems to go unnoticed. He is to a certain extent invisible, as if their respective worlds do not connect, echoing the title *Near and far*. When Gubash finally expresses his bewilderment tinged with anger, he unleashes a torrent of words to which his father responds with a laconic “The End,” never losing his frank smile devoid of irony and closing off any possibility of discussion. The father, and to a lesser degree the mother, seem fundamentally absent. This absence represents the emotional state of the immigrant who has never felt at home in his host country: never mastering the language, lacking professional prospects and forced to abandon everything built up in Yugoslavia. In filming them in this permanent state of limbo, as observers and non-actors in their daily lives, Gubash depicts all of the complexity of his parents' experience as political immigrants.

The video camera is for many artists a tool to bring about an encounter, a dialogue, even if it sometimes only records the silence and the abyss that separates. By filming his own family, Milutin Gubash questions the notion of closeness, which he portrays not through realism but through, unusually, fiction. This differs from the work of Mark Raidpere, a Lithuanian artist who, in *Shifting Focus*, sits across from his mother at the kitchen table and tries, without success, to recover an intimacy, a trust through this face-to-face. The passage from childhood to adulthood involves a necessary separation that can at times widen into an unbridgeable distance. If the video of Mark Raidpere is decidedly low-key, with faintly-lit images and obvious emotions, the work of Milutin Gubash surprises through its visual richness (the artist is very attentive to urban landscapes) and its humour. The smiling father, sporting retro sunglasses and walking

with a cane, exudes a joyous energy that cuts through the drama of the situation. Whatever the son does, lightness dominates and no one seems to take him seriously, even when he pretends to drown himself.

Their perambulations through the city do not ultimately bring them to a place of dialogue, of reconciliation. But after running away from his parents he takes refuge in the woods, where he meets two women making music with kitchen utensils. One of them, Annie, becomes his girlfriend. The end declared by his father is in fact the end of the family unit, which will be rebuilt elsewhere, in other ways. When he edited *Lots*, a projection that combines his videos produced between 2004 and 2007, Milutin Gubash strung together a long cinematic scene in which he and his wife kiss on a roof, encouraged by his parents who film them from a sports car. It is a powerful scene that puts the creation and direction of film at the centre of the construction of private life.

### **Home movies**

Despite being created by one person, the videos of Milutin Gubash weave a kind of global narrative that progressively acquaints the viewer with the character. Intertitles play with this illusion of continuity, both highlighting and excusing an error in the editing of sequences. This clearly establishes the rules for a series that builds reality in successive loops. When the music starts, it is significant because it brings with it the Gypsy world, evoking for the first time the artist's Serbian origins. The quest for his family identity takes him from Calgary to Serbia, where Gubash made his most recent videos. But before that, we witness an encounter with his childhood friend, the birth of his daughter and the death of his father. These last two events are not shown, which once again distinguishes this work from a filmed diary: the child simply appears in the video in the same way that the father disappears. The character of Milutin Gubash wanders through life, searching for meaning, eyes wide open following the advice of a squirrel, entertaining the viewer with his burlesque poses. It's impossible to take this too seriously: you have only to hear his wife saying to their daughter in her singsong voice: "Your father doesn't know what he's doing anymore. He's all mixed up." Jokes and amateur special effects create an increasingly lo-fi aesthetic, reminiscent of home movies. Concern for composition and landscape gives way progressively to the more banal image. Intrusions of the fantastic through special effects reinforce the feeling of the ridiculous and the absurd. Characters speak very little, and meaning is communicated primarily through images, gestures and sound. It is an atypical approach in the realm of film self portraits, where video usually serves to document speech and record stories. Many artists sit down in front of their camera to tell a story, such as Canadian artist Sylvie Laliberté, who excels in the art of storytelling. When Milutin Gubash turns the lens on himself, he expresses himself through mime, evoking mythic figures from the silent film era such as Buster Keaton.

### **Between collaboration and manipulation**

If filming yourself is simple, asking permission to film your loved ones is fraught, especially if you are asking them to play themselves. Though placed at a distance through the highly fictionalized stories of Milutin Gubash, family relationships are not only represented during filming: they are also lived.

*Which way to the Bastille?* (2007) has the artist challenging his father by demanding from him a real actor's work. Sitting in a dark car, he is made to repeat a monologue in which he contemplates the limits of the universe, what lies beyond and the impossibility of nothingness. His face tired and deeply creased with age and illness, the father actually reminds us of a questioning child, which brings back his past life as a physician in Serbia. But his words also suggest a metaphysical questioning in the face of approaching death. We witness through the many takes what could have been a moment charged with emotion, but is instead the troubling sight of a son wanting to teach his father a text that he struggles to retain and inhabit.

Milutin Gubash regularly films his father in silence due to issues of language and memory. Like many immigrants, his English pronunciation is rough, and age makes learning the text even more difficult. The son's obstinance quickly becomes objectionable and the presence of the mother, who remains in the background without intervening, adds to the discomfort of the viewer of this oppressive scene. When, after what seems like too long, the father decides to deny the demands of his son through silence, a weight is

lifted. Although Gubash doesn't show signs of being voyeuristic toward his family, and although his mordant gaze comes to rest mostly on himself, this video reveals the demands he places on those close to him as he attempts to bring them along on his artistic quest. The trespass does not violate his privacy but instead raises questions about personal identity: we wonder whether the father participates out of support or obligation. His voice gentle but firm, Milutin Gubash teeters on the edge of coercion, demanding of his father an effort that seems inappropriate given his condition and that awakens the ghosts of interrogations that the father had undergone before leaving Yugoslavia. Presented on a monitor, this video is one of his most intimate works, showing the violence that can quickly erupt in the heart of family relationships.

*Mirjana* (2010), made with his mother, echoes the issues raised in *Which Way to the Bastille?* In a Skype conversation with her sister in Serbia, the mother translates questions from Gubash about his aunt's life in the 60s during the communist dictatorship. The content of the discussion quickly becomes secondary next to the difficulty the mother is having switching from English to Serbian and retaining what the sister says. Even though this time personal limits and the effects of aging are made apparent in an atmosphere of laughter and complicity, the mother nevertheless begs her son not to use this passage, and he does anyway. Using a "failed" scene, he takes on the fundamental issue of the representation of self, where everyday control occasionally slips and creates situations of discomfort and fragility as others look on.

These two videos are made even more interesting by the fact that they create a radical rupture in tone from the way Gubash normally portrays family relationships in his films: demanding both parents and wife to overact, to construct characters that function as archetypes of the mother, the father, the wife. The feeling of finally witnessing an immersion in a more authentic intimacy remains problematic, however. Though these two videos seem at first glance to be long takes, they have in reality been edited, manipulated. At the end of *Which Way to the Bastille?* when the father gets out of the car and leaves, it is actually Gubash himself playing the father. Viewers are thus caught in our voyeuristic desire to enter the private filmed space, and at the same time left doubting what we see. What is acted, and what is real? In fact, the question is meaningless in the face of a work that seeks to show how a private life can be constructed through fiction. Milutin Gubash willingly states that he is his own "fictional biographer."

However, the father's refusal, near the end of his life, to play the role his son chose for him provides the necessary distance: it is these final images of his father that Gubash uses in this work. The lightness, mockery and detachment at the heart of his work may not allow him to approach the tragic square-on. But the death of his father, though in a burlesque style that recalls the sitcom, can be found at the centre of several of his videos.

### **Charting new territory**

In 2008's *Born Rich, Getting Poorer* (video), Milutin Gubash experimented with a new form, the television series. The show teams up a film crew and actors with his inner circle: his family, his best friend and, this time, his neighbours. Employing sitcom devices such as a laugh track, exaggerated expressions and stereotypical characters, the show tells the story of his own life: a tired father, depressed and suspicious, moves to a house in a residential neighbourhood. In appropriating the sitcom format, Gubash seeks to anchor his thinking in a popular medium, broadening the context of his work. This is a recurrent theme with this artist, who has often created ads for his exhibitions and tried to get them broadcast on television. This desire to exploit the similarity of video art and pop culture television has been shared by many artists over the years, from Gerry Schum who opened a television gallery in Germany to Jean-Christophe Averty and Loïc Connanski who got their art broadcast in television spots. Although *Born Rich, Getting Poorer* was not broadcast, DVD episodes could be borrowed from the gallery, allowing the work to be experienced in a private space and encouraging its appropriation.

The father later reappears in this work as a ghost, but played by the artist in badly-done make-up. After questioning his son about whom he is and where he is from, the ghost-father reveals that he is the king of the Gypsies. Even though he is gone, or perhaps because he is gone, the father is still sending him on identity quests. The artist questions his Yugoslavian culture of origin, which he knows from childhood

stories but not from firsthand experience. Through a Tati-esque satire of a life the artist never knew, permanently out of step with his family and a figure of pathos, Milutin Gubash begins to follow the trail of his family history. As his quest starts to become more personal, from a first trip to the Canadian city of his childhood to his departure for Serbia, the style becomes more intimate and Gubash's character fades to reveal the artist's true emotions. The fourth episode shows the family's trip to the old country, a place his parents had never been back to: expectations and tensions run high. The exaggerated sitcom style subsides and a film diary takes over, punctuated by chance meetings and an immersion in a reality previously only imagined through stories. Confronted with this experience, Gubash struggles to carry on with the task of filming his everyday life. He appears burdened by the weight of the real, and it is his wife who frequently has to take over the creation of the story. During a family trip to his native Novi Sad, Gubash continues to explore his own identity as it fits within the collective, and, even though he seems regularly isolated from his own inquiry, he retains a fundamental link with the people in his emotional environment. The history of a family is experienced and portrayed as a primordial element in the construction of the self.

### **Questioning the story**

His later videos regain the distance of performance, but with a growing concern for exploring, even deconstructing, the tools of narrative. The height of this exploration is *Hôtel Tito* (2010) (trailer), a reconstruction of his parents' honeymoon under the oppressive communist regime. This work is first and foremost a reflection on communication, memory, acting and dubbing, but more broadly on the artifice of narrative, from its simplest (the mother reminiscing about her past) to its most complex form (actors from the Quebec art scene dubbing over amateur English-speaking performers). The story never really immerses the viewer in history, because everything rings false. If telling stories from our lives is difficult, Gubash makes it more so. Instead of reconstructing the honeymoon scene for the benefit of his mother, he creates more distance. He has the actors overact and only roughly recreates her descriptions, leading her to intervene during the filming to take offence at how few soldiers there are in the shot. We can only imagine her disappointment with what is taking shape before her eyes, and which is so far away from what she tried to convey through her story.

This interest in the *mise-en-abîme* of performance is central to most of Milutin Gubash's work and can be found at different levels: through intertitles in *Near and Far*, through the performances during the openings that pile on layers of fiction in the projected videos, and through the publication of the book *Which Way to the Bastille?* [7], which incorporates the father's monologue during the night-time shoots in which he took part along with the artist's entire family (photos also included). In the preface, Milutin Gubash says that although he was not interested in his father's stories as a child, he now wants to remember every one of them so that one day his daughter can hear them [8]. This book is also in the form of a diary that records the story of a life through all of its anecdotes, doubts, regrets and questions. However, written by the artist instead of the stated author of the story, it is once again a fictional exercise of ambiguous status.

The work of Milutin Gubash is driven by concerns with the portrayal of everyday life, our ability to create our own identity through social games, and the construction of our own narratives. Although fiction is often left to the storytellers, it can be an important vehicle to understanding the position of the self within the collective. In the conclusion of *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Erving Goffman clearly proves the validity of the stage as a metaphor in the sociology of the everyday: "There will be a team of persons whose activity on stage in conjunction with available props will constitute the scene from which the performed character's self will emerge, and another team, the audience, whose interpretive activity will be necessary for this emergence." [9]

Milutin Gubash films his family while questioning their double roles as both crew members and performers, brought together on the stage of the everyday to construct the character of the artist. Whether in front of the camera or filling other roles such as sound recordist, his family members participate in Gubash's personal inquiry into the forms and narrative possibilities of everyday life.

### **Notes**

[1] For more on this topic, see the study by Anne-Marie Duguet: *Vidéo, la mémoire au poing*, Paris, Hachette, 1981.

[2] Published in *Oktober* n°1, 1976, then in *Video-culture*, Gibbs M. Smith Inc., Rochester, 1986.

[3] On the inquiry into the narcissistic nature of video art, see M. Roman, *Art vidéo et mise en scène de soi*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2008.

[4] For more on this topic, see *Images video, images de soi*, or *Narcisse au travail*, by Monique Linard and Irène Prax, éditions Dunod, 1985.

[5] Although only the videos of Milutin Gubash are analyzed here, his work also includes photographs, performances and drawings.

[6] *Near and Far* is the extension of a photo series entitled *Re-Enacting Tragedies While My Parents Look On* (2003).

[7] Québec, Éditions J'ai VU, 2007.

[8] The book is even dedicated to his daughter, so that she can better know her grandfather.

[9] Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, 1. United States: Anchor Books, 1959, pg 253.

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