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HOW DOES ONE BECOME MICHAEL JACKSON ?

VALÉRIE BELIN 2007-2016

MONOGRAPH

ÉDITIONS DAMIANI, BOLOGNA, 2017

How does one become Michael Jackson ?

In April 2013 and in January 2014, the Centre Pompidou programmed a strange “performance” that lasted some three hours. When the doors of its Grande Salle opened to admit the public, a handful of dancers could be seen getting ready on stage – trying out costumes, being made up, stretching – as if the show wasn’t ready to start, or perhaps, had no assigned beginning. In fact, as indicated in the program, spectators were free to come and go throughout the performance. Who were these dancers whose body movements were confronted to the potential mobility of the spectator/visitor? Each clearly had a pseudonym, and most of them appropriated the name “Jackson”: Ben Jack’son, Maulinho Jackson, Mo Jackson, MJ Lil, T-Vain Jackson and Smelly Jackson. They were in fact Michael Jackson lookalikes – the same doubles seen in the photographic series made by Valérie Belin in 2003 about people incarnating the singer of “Thriller.” These professional dancers imitate “Michael” – lookalikes often use his first name – all over France, and feverish versions of the King of Pop’s moves have proliferated since his death in 2009. Belin shows an impressive ability to convey something that otherwise pervades most of Jackson’s work: a desire to become someone else, even if it means risking physical transformation; bearing a model in mind, in this case a global icon, and undergoing physical mutation to match his image. This resulted in images whose power lies notably in their ability to combine apparently contradictory qualities: a stereotyped representation embodied in a being whose singularity nevertheless remains insistent within the photographic frame. From a patiently reconstructed artifice that covers the total surface – outrageously made up faces against neutral background and further denatured by the raw light –, arises a unique being whose figure never completely matches the image of Michael Jackson seen a thousand times over.

Belin's series thus determines a form of "motion" within the actual frame, understood here in both its senses: first, a non-coincidence between the lookalike and the model seems to bring the fixed image into motion, from the back-and-forth between the former's body as it is actually perceived, and the floating presence in our memory or imagination of the latter. The beholder also experiences a second motion, that of a stereotype that has ceased to be, as if Belin had extracted from the cliché image of Michael Jackson an image that is no longer relevant to the cliché; a pure surface that turns the cliché around while granting existential density to the lookalike. So what becomes of the Jackson series on stage at the Centre Pompidou? How is photography extended to the space of a large venue dedicated to the "performing arts"? And by the same token, how is the performance shedding new light on Belin's photography?

Photography needs to be precisely followed through the course of its spatial extension, without lapsing into the usual discourse about the "hybridisation of the arts," which all too often fails to take into account the artist's need to push the expressive possibilities of the medium to the limits. Note that Belin worked on the staging with the *I Could Never Be A Dancer* collective, comprising Carine Charaire and Olivier Casamayou, and with Caty Olive for the lighting. One of the initial decisions was to divide the stage in two: on the left, a dance floor with elliptical white and grey painted strips imitating the variations in light produced by the spotlights; on the right, what can be compared to the backstage area of a theatre, where dancers fix their hair, dress and morph into Michael Jackson. One of Belin's concerns was to show the place where the lookalikes undergo their transformation, as if the spectator was in the laboratory where the images were processed, but without so much as re-creating her photography studio. Generally speaking, any strategy of re-creation is prevented here, whether relating to the artist's studio or to biography (what we are seeing is a long way from a naturalistic biopic about Michael) or again to journalistic investigation (no room for uncalled-for voyeurism in the performance). The cabaret effect, too, is avoided, in which regard it is worth praising the decisive effort of the dancers not to settle back into their usual stage habits, when they imitate their idol on tour round France; thus complying with another wish of the artist, namely to achieve a sequence of "tableaux vivants", as if we were faced with an image and unable to make up whether or not it is animated.

More specifically, the stage must function as a "black box"¹ within which a double procedure is implemented, involving on one side the way in which the artifice is produced and the imitation gradually achieved, and on the other, the way in which the dancers themselves become supports for images, thereby returning to the original element where they started from: namely, images of Michael

¹ From the author's conversation with Valérie Belin, 5 February 2014.

Jackson, since the singer exists for them and for us only through our media representations of him. The hypnotic power of the performance derives from the way the lookalikes become images, as we see them taking turns to perform choreographic highlights from Jackson's career. Each dancer is present on stage for about ten minutes, and then returns backstage. Sometimes, several lookalikes dance at the same time, but they are always out of synch with each other, which prevents the performance from being reduced to a demonstration of virtuosity. Above all, none of them sings Michael's lyrics – indeed, these are never heard (neither the choruses, nor even the instrumental tracks of the songs), as the musical loop created by Yasmine Hamdan is totally alien to Jackson's pop universe and offers no occasion for the kind of reflex memories that would be triggered by the sound of one of his hits.

Throughout the three hours of a show in which any attempt at narrative is constantly thwarted, the dancers' bodies oscillate between automatism and petrification. Sometimes, says Belin, they are like "pinned butterflies," and their jerky movements have less to do with imitation of the original than with a kind of immediate snapshot, even if the danced movement never gives the impression of stopping. It is not enough to say that the performance animates Belin's photographic series; the point is also to accompany the reverse process, which is part and parcel of its extension in time. We do not interact with what we see, for what we see tends to merge with a mental projection in which physical recognition of Michael Jackson is associated to an awareness, albeit a diffuse one, of what he fundamentally is: an image, nothing but an image. Hence the concern to make any kind of exchange with the audience obsolete, this being the condition for transforming the stage into a screen, or in any case into a source of images for the spectator caught between thwarted recognition and incomplete recollection.

Hence the perceptual disturbance during the show, that matches the earlier mentioned uncertainty of the gaze looking at the series from 2003: where the organic, singular dimension of the bodies cannot be differentiated from a surface effect that dematerializes them. Just as a single vision would not be enough to exhaust the circuit between the real and the virtual at work in Belin's photographs. Just as three hours are not enough for the spectator – who can enter and leave the theatre during the performance just like someone can return to a museum for a second look at a photo – to explore the perceptual and intellectual mechanisms whereby the image of a world-famous icon is constructed. In ourselves and beside ourselves.

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