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A Group of Self-Portraits

Anny One, *United States of Me*, Centre Copie-Art, Montréal,
April 3-30, 1999

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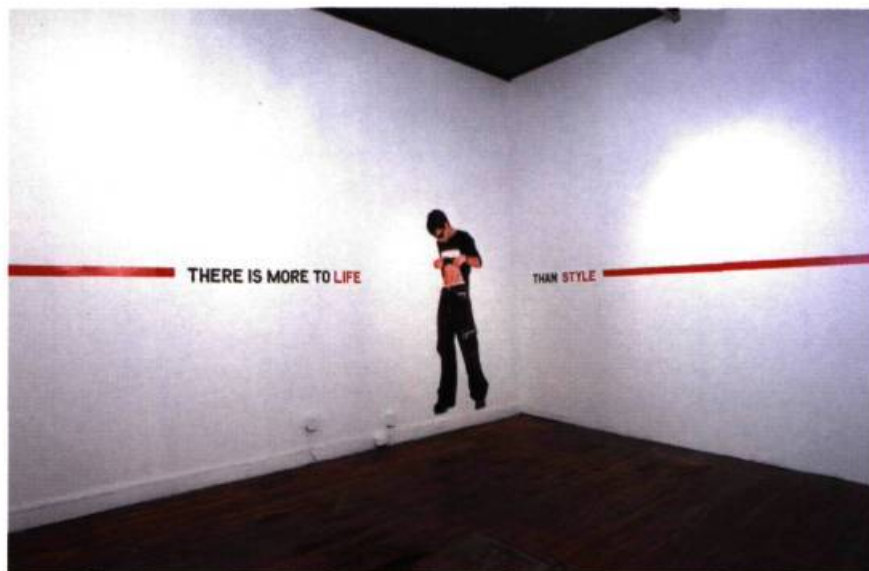
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ACTUALITÉS / EXPOSITIONS

MONTREAL A GROUP OF SELF-PORTRAITS

Anny One, *United States of Me*, Centre Copie-Art, Montréal, April 3-30, 1999



Anny One. Photo: Paul Litherland.

My recent work concerns
self-identity
and self-mediation. (...)

It concerns
distributed egos,
virtualized
in chat avatars
and web home pages. (...)

These techno-augmented ways
to quantify the individual
are reorganizing
the way we interact
with our environment,
with others,
and with ourselves. (...)

Embraced
is a multitude of personas,
to avoid being outnumbered
by a proliferation
of surveillance devices. (...)

With each new piece,
you can witness
the perpetual race
towards another reference,
towards a continually renewed presence,
towards an anti-model of identification.

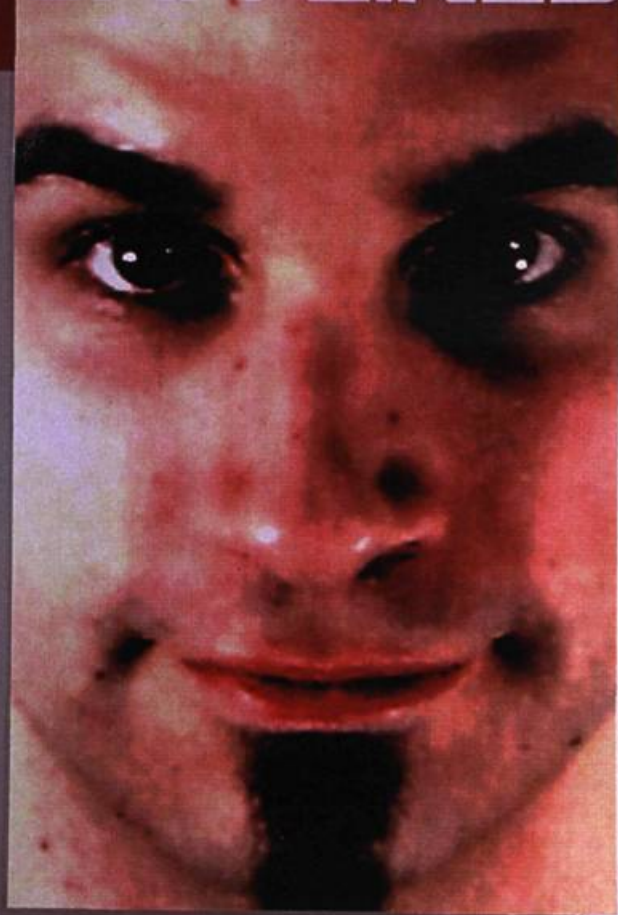
It will not be assimilated.
(Anny One,
[http://www.mediarenaissance.com/
anyone/](http://www.mediarenaissance.com/anyone/))

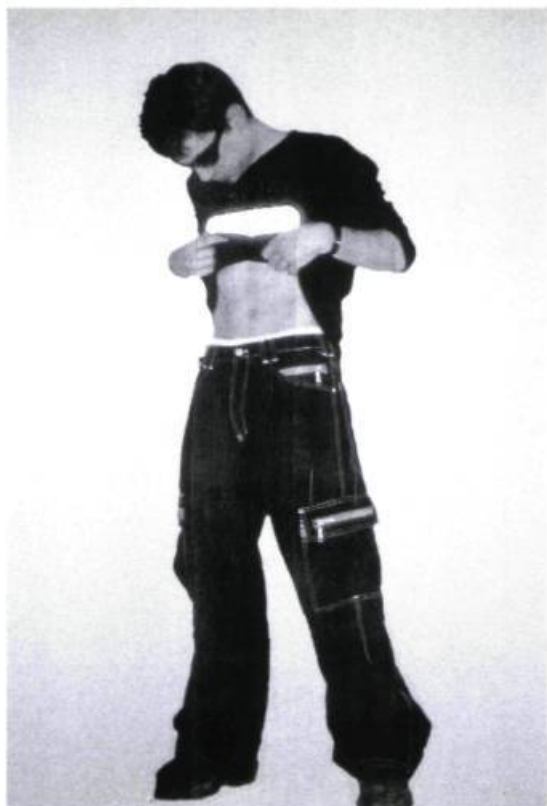
United States of Me evokes a number of currently accepted, progressive notions regarding the nature and origins of the self. Stylistically, it allies itself with club-culture. However, its inability to open out onto a more political plane of references limits its purview.

Centre Copie-Art's white cube was the site for a relatively ephemeral installation comprising graphics and

text painted directly on the walls, and interspersed with photocopied self-portraits. A painted red border divided the room vertically in two, suggesting dyads like above/below, or conscious/unconscious. The border was broken by the black-painted phrase: "THERE IS MORE TO LIFE THAN STYLE", ("LIFE" and "STYLE" were painted red, invoking "life-style"). A full-length figure (presumably the artist), rendered in colour photocopy, and

CAFFEINED





Anny One. Photo: Paul Litherland.

glued to the wall, was shown lifting his shirt and gazing at his navel.

The group of self-portraits extend a practice in which the artist fishes through old snap-shots of himself (showing evidence of changing hair-styles and getting older) and presents them as a non-integrated composite. The gaps between the portraits shown here however, have less to do with the trends of the day, and growing-up, than they do with states of being, or functional roles. While in both cases, the unitary self is broken up and re-presented as multiple, the former snap-shots retain a sense of the document – and thus make a truth-claim that the more recent “poses” cannot. This actually produces an interesting tension between the flesh-and-blood artist, and the constructed figure in the gallery.

Thirty years ago at the Société Française de Philosophie, Michel Foucault enlisted the spectre of Saint Jérôme to assist him in describing the standard measures for authenticating texts. The good saint, he said, devised 4 criteria to determine whether or not different texts might be attributed to the same author. The first stipulated that if one book was “inferior” to others, it would have to be discounted. The second insisted on a consistency of “doctrine”, and the third, of style. Finally, if the text cited statements that were made, or events that occurred after the author’s death, then it would obviously have to be regarded with suspicion.

The “author” in this formulation, was conceived as a unity of value, conceptual and stylistic coherence, and as a historical figure. In short, the author’s was to stabilize and reduce the boundless production of narrative. In a wonderful reversal of the expected, the “author”, in Foucault’s analysis, *restricts* the free circulation of stories. The “author”, he writes, “is the principle of thrift in the proliferation of meaning.”¹

Today, the principle that individuals are, at least in part, a product of linguistic, sexual and social circum-

stance is widely accepted. Preferring words like “effect”, “function”, or “determination”, over words like “man” (or even “woman”), hard-core structuralists might have done away with the humanist “individual” altogether, had the notions of wholeness, mastery and genius not been so deeply ingrained. Nevertheless, it is now quite common to find popular reference to split-selves, or various aspects of individual personalities at odds with each other. Multiple psycho-sexual or psycho-social positions for example, are no longer unanimously viewed as perverse; rather they are at least partially understood to be common characteristics of human existence.

It is in this context that Anny One has been hard at work constructing his identity; not a “real” identity mind you, but a persona. Following in the footsteps of so many great avant-gardists before him, Anny One presents *himself* as artistic material, not as the certificate of truth, but as primary construction-site. Of course, in this age of institutionalized multiplicity and instability, a fully coherent personality is simply not possible – there must be many. However, to characterize this project as a construction-site may be problematic, for it evokes an architect (author), with free-will. This quickly degrades into existential humanism, whereby the plan and the execution are freely arrived at: “I am what I make of myself.”

Surely the preferred theoretical model here would be structuralist, and hold that the various characters in this artistic corpus are already given – in language, in movies and in chat-rooms. “The United States of Me” then, would be an explicit fiction, cohering under the rubric “Anny One.”

However interesting (or even titillating) these games-of-the-head may be, the work-in-the-world does not rise above (or even contrast sufficiently with) its material insubstantiality. This, of course can be justified by referring back to the emptiness of the originary subject: “Anny One”. But by confining this subject to the “individual” self, (and Anny One’s self in particular), it falls into the same apolitical navel gazing it purportedly mocks. By missing the political/social dimension the work cannot become greater than the sum of its parts.

MARCUS MILLER

NOTE

¹ “What Is An Author?” [1969], in *Art In Theory*, eds. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford UK, 1994, p. 927.