

March 8, 2002

Art in Review

Brice Delsperger

Team Gallery

527 West 26th Street

Chelsea

Through March 16

The young French video artist Brice Delsperger (pronounced breece delspair-ZHAY) may not be best served by a gallery setting, but his New York debut is outstanding. Mr. Delsperger is one of several artists involved with restaging existing films, exploring issues of drag or both; others include Pierre Huyghe, Omer Fast, Robert Melee and Yasumasa Morimura.

Mr. Delsperger's remakes are at once acts of labor-intensive narcissism and meditations on drag in filmmaking, gay culture and everyday life. He always uses the original soundtrack of the film being restaged; this keeps him faithful, requires much lip-synching and creates more slippage than a Warhol silkscreen. One or two actors always play all the characters, which generates quantities of costume changes, reshooting and digital manipulation. A result is a lurching film montage whose flagrant fakeness is itself a kind of drag.

Mr. Delsperger has been developing his method since 1993, working under the series title "Body Double," in honor of Brian De Palma's film. Pauline Kael once wrote that Mr. De Palma "replays film history as farce" while keeping "the dirty fun of a bad boy at the center of his art."

Mr. Delsperger's fun is the profound transformation of other people's films. In "Body Double 15," he redoes the famous museum sequence from Mr. De Palma's "Dressed to Kill," casting himself in the roles of the exquisite, sex-starved Angie Dickinson character and her seducer: a mirror image of herself. Heterosexual flirtation morphs into the Narcissus myth played as transsexual twinship in a setting devoted to visual delectation.

"Body Double 17" is based on the roadhouse sequence from David Lynch's "Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me," in which two young women — one selfish and experienced, the other not — pick up some flannel-shirted toughs. Every role is played by Morgane Rousseau or Gwen Roch, who are nearly identical. The results are alternately lesbian bar and squirmy, Bosch-like orgy.

The show's centerpiece is "Body Double X," a full-length remake of Andrzej Zulawski's film "L'Important C'est d'Aimer" ("The Important Thing Is to Love"). This 1975 French noir romance, a cult classic in

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Europe, is so poignant it may actually parody the genre. It features an aging porn star, her troubled, possibly gay husband, and a photographer who attempts rescue by buying her a part in a staging of Shakespeare. Gangsters, actors, directors and film crews fill out the cast, with everyone in the remake played by Jean-Luc Verna, a performance artist Mr. Delsperger has known since art school.

Watching "Body Double X" from a wood bench, projected on the wall of a small space, has a nice Nauman esque immediacy, but the 102-minute film deserves a normal screening. Seeing it start to finish is not without tedium, but the cumulative effect is an almost unbelievable layering of artifice and raw emotion, centering on Mr. Verna's face. He creates a family troupe of actors — all of whom have breasts and deep voices — while conjuring heart-rending approximations of stars like Jeanne Moreau. Gender becomes a many-splendored thing: nothing is straight, all is bent. Mr. Verna should get an Oscar in a category of Mr. Delsperger's devising; the acceptance speech could continue their brilliant collaboration.

ROBERTA SMITH