

## **SUBLIME BROMANTICISM**

### **On Ken Okiishi's *Vital Behaviors* (2019)**

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The plot of *Vital Behaviors* is simple—the artist (Okiishi) asks the young model (Brian) to reenact Instagram pictures, working backward from the present with no further constraints. More like a Lacanian session than a “durational performance,” the variable-length finds its closure only when the mutual interplay of recognitions hit a climax, more riddling than cathartic. However, unlike a Lacanian session, the timing is additionally manipulated by the expectation of an audience, and it is subject to the editorial whims of the artist. Accordingly, Okiishi ends the long take on Brian zipping-up a hoody then jump cuts to him taking a water break with a cheeky smile, seemingly poised for the video to loop, end, or carry on.

I should rather say that *Behaviors* has no plot and is a documentation of Brian’s physiological re-composition of gestures from memory as if he were learning how to act (or really, realizing that he *can* act) in real time. Brian, who is also Okiishi’s actual physical (somatic) trainer, is suddenly the one being trained in the art of balancing recall and impulse. The gestures are recalled with increasing finesse (confidence, coolness, control, speed) but without becoming mechanized. The lesson is never to stray far from the “first thought, best thought” of spontaneous impulse (freedom). *Behaviors* captures an impromptu improv game that trains in romantic recall. First thought, in Allen Ginsberg’s theory of improvisatory writing, is not about repeating the content of a prior thought but rather maintaining the desire of impulsivity without sacrificing the techniques of writing; just as the Wordsworthian poet isn’t channeling spontaneous overflow of feeling into raw form but rather re-collecting themselves in the static realm of tranquility.

What is strange here is that Brian reenacts photos that were already staged with, at least, “lax” intention and framing. Nobody uses Instagram without an omnipresent awareness of the aspirational behavioral modifications that the selfie inspires. However, the more traditionally theatrical route taken in this video adds yet another reflexive layer to the selfie, which, like an affective version of a color filter, attempts to fix what was broken in the original and thereby discovers (invents) an unconscious (retroactively constructed) lack.

## **FEEDBACK**

This training session ends up adopting the function of the screen test, in the practical sense of playing back and highlighting the subject’s strengths and faults in relation to a given role. In this case, the screen test inspired the model to recognize his strengths at acting, enabling him to take on “actor” as a new role. The actor is the successful reenactor; he makes it seem “as if” it is the first time (his origin lies in the role of the hypocrite). Brian proved his finesse as actor, leading to subsequent casting in mainstream television shows. As such, *Behaviors* belongs to the discovery genre of screen tests, often re-dramatized in *Star is Born* narratives, rather than the more sadistic bathos of Warhol’s screen tests, where the subject is caught in a feedback loop without upward mobility. Okiishi describes Warhol’s films as examples of inassimilable cognitive dissonance that vivify contradictions in the feedback loops that watermark his work and American media culture at large. Warhol’s films contradict the unity of narcissism and solipsism that perpetuates the theoretical Cartesian subject and the simulacrum as void. This contradiction does not refute these theories, or provide a queer alternative, or even a cogent analysis, but rather invents a new vantage point to observe from. Not Warholian in the sense of fixed or giddy, the vantage point in *Behaviors* seems to be testing its own endurance in the face of the present.

## SELFIES FUCK ME UP

The photos Brian reenacts are mostly stir-of-the-moment takes of him + cool location + friends. However, in one picture, Brian explicitly showcases mnemonic recall, as he takes a selfie on a cliff that is captioned by a reflection on the suicide of his best friend, or bro. This staged cliffhanger elicits the sublime depths of memory by picturing them as the horror of the abyss before jumping and mediates this terror with the controlled stance that rebinds him to a bodily and representational holding-on. The ability to recall trauma and rebind it through tranquil forms of reenactment is both a method of survival and what Adorno and Horkheimer pinpoint as the initiating gesture of the Enlightenment in *The Odyssey*. Training oneself to move fluidly between absolute detachment and inactivity to figures of attachment and enactment is the balancing act that unites the artist and actor as enlightened auteurs.

Brian's inability to correctly recall with which hand he took each selfie leads him to say, "selfies fuck me up." The inability to graft the present self to the past selfie is the same as the process of taking the selfie to begin with, and before that the process of forming a self (the mirror stage), which is always (and already) an exasperated repetition. There is nothing before recording, which etymologically means, restoring the memory to the heart, where it is always already missing. "Selfies fuck me up," does not refer to the passivity of the model to the representation of their selfhood but to the impossibility of perfect modeling. This impossibility has long been the Ur-Model of sculpture as an alleged record of Becoming over Being—as with the pronounced pensiveness of Rodin's *Thinker*, which has led to an infinite regress of poser/poseur confusions.

Brian had not acted before this video, but he had modeled underwear. He is comfortable wearing his state of undress as a natural costume. So, he was already a half-step away from acting, since the index of recalled action is always half-dressed in veils. What the actor models is not a "real" future or past but rather the mood of expectancy: a sublimely artificial rendering of memory like the 3D-printed and 3D-animated models in Okiishi's "A Model Childhood" (2018).

Brian, as social media trainer, models *your* future, an unattainable ideal, the index of hotness. Okiishi, as media artist, models the unattainability of memory—his "model childhood" and his other remakes of authentic origins belie the difference between authentic origin and simulated reenactment; attainment and aspiration. However, Okiishi's work is not a didactic exercise to show all gestures to be always (and already) performative automated controlled ideological mechanisms. Rather than debunking or valorizing the origin, he shows there is something of the real in the conceptualization of the origin that remains no matter what avant-garde operation is placed upon it. This work tells us more than what we know through cynical irony, romantic sincerity, or their hybridization. That is, Okiishi points to what we cannot know—blind spots that persist due to our inbuilt passion for ignorance. He does not throw away nostalgia for origins, even when accepting there is nothing substantial inside of origins, because something else can be adduced from the origin, by virtue of not being in it, that can only be realized through Sisyphean searching.

## REMAKE

It is often thought that the detournement of the remake (or the appropriative re-photograph) reveals something about the ideological context of the original that was not knowable before the remake superimposed its frame. Due to the homestead principle of transforming the original through aesthetic and intellectual remediation, the remake is alleged to offer *more* than the original. This axiom depends on shortsightedness since the built-in intellectual obsolescence that this presentist theory promulgates dooms the remake to be remade. Rather than dwelling on the original vs. remake antinomy, Okiishi's work shows that consciousness carries an impossible need for supplementary remaking (a need for increased immediacy or intimacy) that cannot be satiated by discursive synthesis or bracketed as a paradoxical quandary since it is generative of the very mediation it seems to "fuck up." As with his remake of Larry Clark's *Kids*, "Telly & Casper" (2000), and his parodic quest to find authentic Chelsea queerness, "David Wojnarowicz' in 'NY'" (1999), Okiishi's reconstitution of the signifiers of coolness and martyrdom reveal how they are already imitations without origin, encoded and hypostasized. Okiishi's jests, rather than reversing or deflating the power relations, do something more extraordinary—they reveal how pre-coded gestures perpetuate themselves despite our awkward inability to adequately forge 1:1 reproductions.

## INSIDE THE ARTIST'S STUDIO

The camera movements in *Behaviors* (jittery in and out zooms) seem to mime the movements of the eyes; they are the result of fidgeting fingers, a continuously restarted effort to capture the performance as if tripped up by the power of the subject. Okiishi keeps resetting the focal punctum of the shot, as if catching his breath, exasperated from proximity to the subject. But then he physically rushes into and out of the shot (as a roving rückenfigur) and for a moment nobody is behind the camera until he rushes back face forward — his presence (his "hand" and signature) announced by another zoom, which, we are to believe, is not a remote or automatic feature, though at times it seems to be a human imitating the automatic scan. Now, as with much of Okiishi's work, we are approaching the gestural scrambling of the Bergsonian reading of technological art, where comedy comes from humans strangely imitating machines (in jest) and tragedy comes from machines strangely imitating humans (uncanny valley). Okiishi's remaking and automation of painterly, lyric, authentic gestures are not meant to triumphantly prove simulation theories but rather take certain aspects of simulation as a given in order to proceed with experimental and new formalizations. Jest and gesture are not severed by the fallacies of theory, but rather *jesture* is used as an aesthetic unit in itself that like a brushstroke (which he has also subjected to automated/authentic scrambling) remakes the very categories (genres and identities) through which art is officially read rather than being subject to them.