

Collaboration recording its own condition (3 years, 5 works, 3 mirrors) *

Simon Baker

Je me voyais me voir, (I saw myself seeing myself, or, I saw me see me) a remarkable, quotable line from Paul Valéry's 1917 poem *La Jeune Parque*.¹ Doubly remarkable in fact, provoking comment first from the surrealist Louis Aragon in his 1928 *Treatise on Style* and then, channelling Aragon, Jacques Lacan returns to the same phrase in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* in 1973.² Lacan, for his part, signals this interpolation at the start of the book, recalling lines from Aragon's 1963 poem *Le Fou d'Elsa*:³

*I am that wretch comparable with mirrors
That reflect but cannot see
Like them my eye is empty and like them inhabited
By your absence which makes them blind*

Lacan borrows Aragon's image of an eye inhabited by the absence of another; mirrors that remain sightless (and therefore useless) until engaged by a viewer, to evoke an associative complex of sight, reflection and wholeness. Having long since identified the mirror 'stage', Lacan continues to recognise and elaborate upon its effects:

I saw myself seeing myself, young Parque says somewhere...We are dealing with the philosopher, who apprehends something that is one of the essential correlates of consciousness in its relation to representation, and which is designated as *I see myself seeing myself*...What isolates this apprehension of thought by itself is a sort of doubt, which has been called methodological doubt, which

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concerns whatever might give support to thought in representation...*I see myself seeing myself*. The privilege of the subject seems to be established here from that bipolar reflexive relation by which, as soon as I perceive, my representations belong to me.⁴

Aragon, for his part, long before he became a poet whose romantic sophistries inspired psychoanalysts, was a cynic of impressive wit and verve. There are then, it would seem, two very different Aragons present in Lacan's text, as irreconcilable to their latter-day audiences as they would have been unrecognisable to one another, seeing themselves. For the unsentimental surrealist Aragon, Valery's 'I saw myself seeing myself' is no enigma, on the contrary, it is a clumsy mistake:

What remains, as far as the eye can see, is Valery alone in front of his mirror, making no discovery, and having only a banal and repetitive glimpse of himself: *je me voyais me voir*, - he could just as easily have said, *je me voyais, me voyais*, which, like certain streets, goes only one way. Very similar to I screwed myself, screwed myself, screwed myself.⁵

The pedantic distinction that Aragon implies between 'I saw myself seeing myself' (a reflexive action) and 'I saw myself, saw myself' (a repetitive tic), it might be argued, lies at the heart of the individual practices of both collaborating artists, John Hilliard and Jemima Stehli, although, it must be added, for completely different reasons. Their relations to this critical difference might, in fact, be described as absolute mirror opposites.



Fig. 1: John Hilliard, *He Sat Gazing At the Mirror*, 1976.
Image courtesy of the artist.

Hilliard, has, since the early seventies, insisted on a rigorous attention to the phenomenology of photographic practices and processes, carefully and self-consciously contriving a series of schemes or conceits with their own inbuilt repetitive components: from early works like *Camera Recording Its Own Condition* (1971), *He Sat Gazing At the Mirror* (1976) or *X* (1982), to his most recent multiple exposures, overlaying several backgrounds around a repeated central image, subject or object (Fig. 1).⁶ Stehli, for her part, in series of works like *After Helmut Newton's 'Here They Come'* (1999), *Standing Nude/Studio Nude* (2001) (Fig. 2) and *Mirror*, (2001) has returned again and again to the uncomfortable subject position that Aragon assigns Valery, 'alone, in front of the mirror' so to speak, risking both banal *and* repetitive glimpses of herself, in order to bring about the conditions for a genuine reflexive *affect*.⁷ So although they may seem to have mirrors and cameras in common, and although it may appear that these blind objects have been facing comparable subjects, there is no reason to think that their collaboration would be straightforward. Following the Aragon quote to its conclusion; each enters the one-way street of the other's practice (and see themselves, see themselves, see themselves) from the opposite direction.

Being introduced into the way of seeing of another can be an uncomfortable experience, and it is only relatively recently that art historians and theorists have sought to understand the resistance implicit in the process, most usefully in relation to the practice of portraiture.⁸ Although Gertrude Stein had long since succeeded in characterising the problem (in a proto-Lacanian sense) through an analogy with the operation of language. Explaining her portrait by Picasso, the result of eighty long sittings (and a crisis of confidence/stroke of genius, depending on your reading of his replacement of her face with a mask) Stein wrote: 'I was and I am happy with my portrait, for me, it is I, and it is the only reproduction of me which is always I, for me.'⁹ Stein's calculated division of her own subjectivity (into 'me' and 'I') accompanies the process by which she was incorporated into her portrait through a series of exchanges with the artist. The theory of the transactional nature of the portrait (applied to this situation with



Fig. 2: Jemima Stehli, *Standing Nude/Studio Nude*, 2001
Image courtesy of the artist.

great effect) means, as Stein implies with her account of the relevance of the process of sitting, that the agency of the sitter somehow be incorporated into the interpretation of the resulting image. And if the Lacanian aspect of this transaction theory (since elaborated by both art historians and literary theorists) has anything to teach us, it is that we recognise the relative structural positions of the two active protagonists: the subject of the image and the artist whose gaze they are subject to (the imaginary gaze that they attribute to the artist).¹⁰ 'The gaze I encounter' Lacan says, 'is not a seen gaze, but a gaze imagined by me in the field of the Other', and the nature of this gaze is bound up in the confusion at the heart of that same, hypnotic, reflexive phrase (*je me voyais me voir*): exemplary and illusory at the same time.¹¹

From the moment this gaze appears, the subject tries to adapt himself to it, he becomes that punctiform object, that point of vanishing being, with which the subject confuses his own failure...The gaze is specified as unapprehensible. That is why it is, more than any other object, misunderstood, and it is perhaps for this reason, too, that the subject manages, fortunately, to symbolize his own vanishing and punctiform character, in the illusion of the consciousness of *seeing oneself see oneself*, in which the gaze is elided.¹²

Now, one might argue, neither Hilliard nor Stehli make portraits in any conventional sense in their individual practices. Even when collaborators are called into the production of work they are very likely assuming assigned positions that are schematic or structural, rather than personalised. In the series *Strip* (1999), for example, Stehli has people she knew more or less well and who would have been quite easily identifiable (Matthew Collings, Adrian Searle) become 'critics' (Fig. 3). Their apparent participation is however, fundamental to the complex way that the images work. In the first instance they see the 'strip' in a way that the viewer does not, the implication being that they enjoy some privileged point of view. But they also picture the strip for the viewer, releasing the camera shutter to document the artist's action. One might say that they



Fig. 3: Jemima Stehli, *Strip* (Adrian Searle, Matthew Collings), 2001
Image courtesy of the artist.

thereby enact the process of seeing themselves seeing in a thoroughly alienated way. *I saw myself seeing*, the critic might say, *and yet it's not really me looking: this is not how I usually look: the representation is not mine*. The illegitimate nature of the self-image that results is further complicated by the emphatic presence of the artist (signifying the author's power within the work) and its position within a series (signifying a wider authorial rhetoric).

This distinctly uncomfortable position arises from a work that hedges its bets somewhere between a contrived, directed action, imagined by the artist, and the spontaneous reaction of the invited participant. But in selecting as participants art-world figures who would remain themselves (albeit as tropes or characters: curators, critics, writers) Stehli also signals an attitude to the choice of visual material with which she will work. Working with, or through, pre-existing works by photographers (Helmut Newton, Bert Stern), sculptors (Allen Jones, Larry Bell) or painters (Francis Bacon), Stehli has adopted a practice that is neither fully collaborative nor entirely parasitic. In contrast to the more widely adopted systems of appropriation within contemporary art, Stehli

attempts a genuine re-working of subject positions and authorial agency by implicating herself as an artist within the structural, aesthetic regime or even process, of another. In a way then, far from exerting pressure on, or overhauling a pre-existing image (in the way we might associate with artists like Louise Lawler, Sherrie Levine or Richard Prince) Stehli is constantly forcing herself to see herself from, or within, an adopted point of view.

Her series of works *After Helmut Newton's 'Here They Come'* (1999) best exemplifies this aspect of her practice (Fig. 4). To realise these works, Stehli deliberately set out to recreate as closely as possible a single element of one of Newton's most iconic images. In fact, Stehli restaged this single part (the figure on the left) of two of Newton's works, the pendant pair *Sie Kommen I & II*, (1981) which show, side by side, the same four models advancing together, naked and clothed.¹³ It would be easy to misread Stehli's gesture here, to set it within the framework offered by gender politics as an attempt to re-claim or even overturn Newton's (and by implication the fashion world's) exploitative, scopophilic attitude. This, however, would be to overlook the extent to which Stehli's work is concerned with, and has as its subject, practice itself: the way in which images are constituted by a particular process. The stake in *After Helmut*



Fig. 4: Jemima Stehli, *After Helmut Newton's 'Here They Come'*, 1999
Image courtesy of the artist.

Newton's *'Here They Come'* is not some abstract politics of the body (although this may well be invoked by the result) it is the more quotidian business of agency and artistic production. What is startlingly clear in a comparison of Stehli's work with Newton's original is the extent to which the aim of the piece was to follow precisely its artistic direction, and thus Newton's artistic vision: the model's appearance and pose, progress through the picture field, cast shadow, in fact every repeatable aspect of the composition has been reproduced as closely and as carefully as possible. This, it goes without saying, will have taken time; even the few published contact sheets for this work suggest a mind-numbing process of staging, looking, re-thinking, re-doing, repetition *ad (almost) infinitum*. Although this is something any fashion model might experience on a daily basis, it is also a creative process, the logic of which would be, at the very least, at odds with the experience of posing. By making herself the model in *After Here They Come*, Stehli's intervention takes place at the level of production, inhabiting (after the fact) the position that Newton's original model was given, she situates herself precisely within a framework that Newton imagined (and then realised) for someone else. By also, at the same time, adopting the role of the photographer (a position underlined by the shutter release cable left visible in the frame), Stehli also assumes another position, this time Newton's own: but even while taking his place and thereby adopting a degree of authorial agency, she is still subject to his (tacit) oversight. After all, for the work to succeed in giving her the experience of adopting the model's position, she must follow Newton precisely and absolutely.

This sense of inhabiting a pre-organised, pre-determined pictorial situation, is equivalent, I would suggest, to that offered to the participants in *Strip*, and the effects are broadly similar: following both Newton, and his model into the frame of *Here They Come*, by inhabiting both positions but leaving them subject to the authority of an original ideal, Stehli effectively contrives to *see herself seeing herself* from the point of view of another. It is for this reason that it makes sense to think of this activity in terms of the realisation of a fantasy scenario: actually getting inside a Helmut Newton photograph. Entering the kind of 'Perverse Space' sketched out by Victor Burgin in his discussion of Helmut Newton's *Self-*

*portrait with wife June, and models, Vogue studio, Paris, 1981.*¹⁴ By any standards a photograph of virtuoso construction, it too, has been the subject of re-workings by Stehli. But it is the sense of Newton's pictorial space as an impossible fantasy for the viewer that is interesting here. The conundrum of Newton's self-portrait is that he somehow manages to both have and see, the experience of photographing a 'statuesque' nude model. It is a stunning and confusing work, which fetishises even as it dramatises that same process of fetishisation. Rather than trying to revisit Burgin's brilliant reading of this work, however, I would point instead towards its implicit fetishisation of Newton as an exemplary alternative within the post-conceptual discourse on photography. Through Burgin's text, Newton, like Allen Jones, has been placed in a peculiar relation to contemporary practice, having been evoked in a disinterested, even utilitarian way, for the purposes of a theoretical account of the problem of looking.¹⁵ Newton is ideally outside the discourse of conceptual art, and is only dragged in, by his ear, when there is a problem within it, that his work somehow dramatises.

For Stehli then, whose work is entirely directed towards, and focused on, the politics of practice (and sometimes seems as concerned with iconography as Newton with gender politics) the decision to 'work with' Newton was a particularly awkward one. Not only in the sense that Newton is a formidable technical photographer whose work would be fiendishly difficult to replicate, but in the sense that assuming his position was likely to mean stepping through the looking glass and beyond the bounds of criticality. Furthermore, to fetishistically attempt to both inhabit and re-direct Newton's work, risked retracing his steps to the mirror: to see oneself, and catch oneself, reflected in the process of looking as Helmut Newton may have intended. In a bizarre reversal of the original Lacanian concept of one's own ideal imaginary other, what looks back is an ideal imagined by another, standing obstinately in your place. Perhaps, however, we are back at the point of understanding the moment of crisis that Lacan describes: 'From the moment this gaze appears, the subject tries to adapt himself to it... [symbolizing] his own vanishing and punctiform character,

in the illusion of the consciousness of *seeing oneself see oneself*, in which the gaze is elided.¹⁶

If there are such risks for Stehli in being implicated in the work of another artist in this way, in acceding to the imaginations of Helmut Newton or Allen Jones, how should we understand a collaboration between Stehli and Hilliard, within which, at different times and in very different ways, each of the participants inhabited and directed the other within both their own and each other's work? The first of their collaborative works, *Triple Exposure* (Fig. 5), is a case in point,



Fig. 5: John Hilliard and Jemima Stehli, *Triple Exposure* (black and white), 2001
Image courtesy of the artists.



Fig. 6: John Hilliard, X, 1982
Image courtesy of the artist.

being a re-working of ideas in several of Hilliard's earlier works (principally *Code* and *X* from 1982 (Fig. 6), but also to an extent at least, *Display* and *AKA* from 1994) with Stehli taking the places of the female models.¹⁷ Although *Triple Exposure*, it can be argued, is a more elaborately structured work than its precursors, overlaying three moments in time (signified by the three points of light hitting Stehli's body), it remains, because of this, very much in the spirit of Hilliard's career-long exploration of the ways in which photography directs perception. As a collaborative work then, it would appear to offer very little agency to Stehli as an artist inhabiting the place of the model. Perhaps, however, this is the point: after all, in her engagement with Newton's work, her concern was to follow precisely the pictorial markers that Newton set out in the original image. Working with Hilliard, who was physically there to set up and take the photograph might be regarded as a triumph of sorts. The question for Hilliard, on the other hand, was what the stake was in having a living, breathing artist implicate herself within, and inhabit, a structure that had previously been his to direct and control. In an equal collaboration, Hilliard was not forced into the unhappy position of the critic, or curator in *Strip* but he did remain dramatically present in the work as its photographer, in a way that, although unusual within his own practice, finds a perfect analogy in Newton's *Self-*

Portrait. Triple Exposure might, on the face of it, resemble an attempt to re-work a Hilliard image, but it also (in both process and appearance) evokes Stehli's discomfiting re-working of Newton. That, perhaps, is why both artists claim it as the collaboration that is closest to their own work.¹⁸

It is here that the notion of fantasy, so appropriate to Stehli's work with Newton (and so crucial to Burgin's reading of *Self-portrait with wife June and models*) becomes an issue within the collaboration itself: a series of creative double-binds within the processes of which they are simultaneously making one work (their own) and inhabiting another (their collaborator's). It is no coincidence, then, that mirrors, the most literal means of both producing and representing this characteristic splitting and doubling of roles, were so central to the collaboration; featuring in *Triple Exposure*, *This Picture* and *Double-Up*.

This move into fantasy, orchestrated in the collaboration through the mirror (or looking-glass) corresponds in nature to the potential transformation that is always possible in Stehli's practice (following the 'banal and repetitive glimpses' that Aragon ascribed to Valéry's *Jeune Parque*). In the preparatory material for *This Picture*, for example, the status of the mirror within the studio is clear and straightforward, with Hilliard joining Stehli in the unfamiliar position of *seeing himself seeing*. In a businesslike studio environment, Stehli stands naked behind a large camera on a tripod aimed square at the viewer: the image seen is the one she is taking. To the right of this activity, in various positions as the series develops, we see Hilliard; looking first into the mirror on which a small image has been stuck; and then down at the same photograph as he holds it in front of Stehli's lens. The photograph, which, initially at least, it hard to make out, is a black and white image of Stehli standing naked in what looks like the same studio: so far so 'banal and repetitive'.



Fig. 7: John Hilliard and Jemima Stehli, *This Picture*, 2002
Image courtesy of the artists.

The shift in the operation of this work occurs in the selected frame, the image that finally becomes *This Picture* (Fig. 7). For here, Stehli the photographer has gone, replaced by Hilliard bending over one tripod with another camera poised to the left under a studio light. The photograph has returned to the surface of the mirror but is no longer as obviously attached in the way that it had been. The mirror is now more obviously the whole of the picture plane, with the photograph centred within it. Now it is clear that this is indeed the same studio, a black and white miniature double of the space in which the two photographers have been working. This inset image, the mirror's image, is the ideal (fantasy) scenario. Stehli stands alongside her camera, shutter-release cable in hand, addressing the lens calmly and steadily. Her body is carefully lit, she is classically posed, poised and very much in control: this is her space, her work, her representation.

Meanwhile, back in the real world, the space squeezed around the edge of this picture within a picture, the light is harsh and raking, striking the side of Hilliard's face and the sleeve of his shirt. He looks intense; hunched and absorbed; anything but relaxed. In a kind of visual pun, as well as taking the picture, he seems to be looking down into the space that he is photographing. In the right-hand side of this framing space we see Stehli again, this time from behind, still naked, leaving the studio space. This time, however, she seems strangely disconnected from the production of the work, as though she has been found surplus to requirements, superseded by the presence of her ideal imaginary other. The effect of this doubling/splitting is uncanny: disconcerting and yet strangely familiar.

This Picture conjures a host of associations in Stehli's work, Hilliard's work, and of course, references the internal iconographic structure of Helmut Newton's *Self-Portrait with wife June and models* (the last word in reversible full-frontal fantasy). *This Picture*, in a way, shows Stehli walking out of the open door in Newton's Paris studio: turning her back on both her own fantasy, and that of the photographer (whether it be hers, Hilliard's or Newton's). Hilliard's presence in this dramatisation of fantasy and its vicissitudes completes this series of referential reflections: this is a collaboration *staging itself staging itself*, recording its own condition; its effects and affects. As Stehli leaves the studio, and Hilliard photographs her photograph, we are left with Aragon's lines: *'that wretch comparable with mirrors, that reflect but cannot see, like them...empty and like them inhabited, by [the] absence which makes them blind.'*¹⁹

¹ 'Je me voyais me voir, sinueuse, et dorais/De regards en regards, mes profondes forêts.' Paul Valéry, *La Jeune Parque*, Paris, 1917.

² For more on the complex and nuanced relationship between Lacan and surrealism, particularly his interest in and use of theoretical texts by André Breton and Salvador Dalí, see chapters 3 & 4 of Margaret Iversen's excellent book *Beyond Pleasure: Freud, Lacan, Barthes*, (Penn State, 2007).

³ Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. A. Sheridan, (London: Hogarth Press, 1979), p 17.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p 81.

⁵ Louis Aragon, *Treatise on Style*, trans. A. Waters, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991), pp 77-8.

⁶ See John Hilliard et al., *John Hilliard*, (Manchester & Heidelberg: Wunderhorn), 1999.

⁷ See David Burrows (ed.), *Jemima Stehli*, (Birmingham: Article Press, 2002).

⁸ I am thinking here of the work of Harry Berger Jr., Robert Lubar and David Lomas, which has revolutionised the way the so-called 'portrait transaction' has been described in terms of intra-subjective and inter-subjective transactions. See H. Berger, Jr., *Fictions of the Pose: Rembrandt Against the Italian Renaissance*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000; R.S. Lubar, 'Unmasking Pablo's Gertrude: Queer Desire and the Subject of Portraiture' *Art Bulletin*, vol. LXXIX, no. 1, March 1997, David Lomas, *The Haunted Self: Surrealism, Psycho-analysis, Subjectivity*, Yale: Yale University Press, 2000. For a summary of their positions see Simon Baker, *Surrealism, History and Revolution*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007, pp 263-7.

⁹ Gertrude Stein, *Picasso*, (London: Batsford, 1939), p 8. Stein's portrait is the focus of Robert Lubar's essay, cited above.

¹⁰ See H. Berger Jr., 'Lacan on the Narcissism of Orthopsychic Desire', op. cit., pp 155-169

¹¹ Lacan, op. cit., p 84.

¹² *Ibid.*, p 84.

¹³ Both original images are reproduced in D. Burrows (ed.), *Jemima Stehli*, (op. cit.)

¹⁴ Victor Burgin, 'Perverse Space' in B. Colomina, (ed.), *Sexuality and Space*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 1992,

pp 219-240. See also Burgin, 'Newton's Gravity', in C. Squires (ed.), *Overexposed: Essays on Contemporary Photography*, (New York: The New Press, 1999), pp 48-55.

¹⁵ I am thinking here of Laura Mulvey's 1973 essay, 'Fears, Fantasies and the Male Unconscious or 'You don't know what's happening, do you Mr Jones?'' available in L. Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, London: Macmillan, 1989, pp 7-13.

¹⁶ Lacan, op. cit., p 83.

¹⁷ All of these works are reproduced in John Hilliard (op. cit.)

¹⁸ See 'Collaboration recording its own condition (2 interviews, 1 editor)' originally published in Simon Baker et. al. *Arguments: Jemima Stehli, John Hilliard* (Milan: Artra, 2009), reproduced in *Rebus: Journal of Art History and Theory*, Summer 2010.

¹⁹ Lacan, op. cit., p 17 (author's version).

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