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Jillian McDonald's Celebrity Relations

BY SYLVIE FORTIN

Call Jillian McDonald a relations artist. Relationships are her medium, fleeting encounters her material. McDonald's works often exist on the margins of art institutions and activate public space in disquieting ways. Yet, they are all about intimacy. If her performance projects—in *Mile Share*, 2004, she invited strangers to run a mile with her; in *Advice Lounge*, 2003, she provided free, non-professional advice to passersby; for *Houseplant*, 2002-2003, she offered to deliver a houseplant to strangers' residences; and in *Shampoo*, 2001, she posted a message in a local newspaper, inviting strangers to come for a free shampoo—seem light years away from her media works, the focus on relations provides an interpretive continuum.

First came Billy Bob. Thornton, that is. He has, in fact, turned into an obsession of sorts for McDonald. Comprised of eleven short video works, *Me and Billy Bob*, 2003, launched the project which has since expanded in many directions. For *Me and Billy Bob*, McDonald inserted carefully constructed footage of her image into scenes from Thornton's movies, thus creating a compendium of flirtation—a wink, a light touch, a brief kiss, and a heart break. Together, the eleven short clips seem to reflect a long-time relationship, the presence of this woman in Thornton's onscreen life. A website (www.meandbillybob.com) brings together the many parts of this private obsession, inserting McDonald's project in the public domain of online fan culture.

The photographic work *After Billy Bob's Tattoos*, 2004, is an ode to Thornton's body art. A series of 13 paired photographs, the work juxtaposes cameo-shaped close-ups of Thornton's tattoo, lifted from his official website, with their larger drawn interpretations by McDonald (see cover). Three aspects of this project are key: the tattoos are drawings for photographs that merge the practices of drawing, performance, and photography in provocative ways; McDonald scrupulously and extensively marks her body, positioning her drawn tattoos precisely where Thornton has located them on his own body; McDonald's tattoos are temporary. These components provide clues as to McDonald's conception of the represented body as site of projection.

The video *Billy Bob Tattoo June 2004* documents a month-long private performance. Or is it rather a protracted



Jillian McDonald, still from *Me and Billy Bob*, 2003, limited edition DVD, 7 minutes, color, black and white, sound (courtesy of the artist)

performance for the camera, disguised as private? Or, instead, could it simply be considered a drawing? A steady camera is aimed at the artist's knees. Drawing, a woman's hands animate the frame. On June 1, they draw a "Billy Bob" tattoo in black pen and marker. Day after day for the entire month of June, they redraw it, following the faded contours of the previous day's inscription. The succession of dates, in the lower right of the frame, acts as a metronome. Something else nonetheless happens within the limited purview of this frame—or, rather, it happens to us as we watch McDonald's performance. Every detail is amplified. We become aware of the slightest changes in wardrobe, the length, pattern and texture of the woman's skirts defining the image's upper edge, her rare sporting of pants marking a break in the otherwise regular performance. Over days, her favorite red ring also dances from finger to finger, and her drawing speed and expertise both increase. The tattoo itself migrates, each temporary redrawing slightly different, each contour a millimeter off, so that, in the end, the work could also be considered an animated drawing.

Drum Solo for Billy Bob, 2004, a 3-minute video-performance, further blurs the line between real life and celebrity. If McDonald's friends have been sucked into the vortex of her celebrity obsession, Billy Bob himself has not been left untouched. This piece can, in fact, be considered an unknown collaboration as its main actor is the drum stick Thornton gave McDonald—another adoring fan—from the stage of his New York concert on September 5, 2003. This is,



Top: Jillian McDonald, detail of site-specific video installation: still from *Billy Bob Got Plastic Surgery—TV Commercial for the Drake Hotel*, 2004, video, 30 seconds (courtesy of the artist)

Center: Jillian McDonald, still from *Billy Bob Tattoo June 2004*, 2004, video, 40 minutes, color, sound (courtesy of the artist)

Below: Jillian McDonald, *Advice Lounge*, June 3–5, 2004, 3-day intervention in storefront for *Spasm II* Public Art Festival in Saskatoon (courtesy of the artist); also performed at ISEA 2004 in Tallinn, Estonia; Art + Technology Symposium at the University of Utah, Salt Lake City; and *New Forms Festival* in Vancouver.

▲ McDonald drew **Billy Bob** on her knee every day in June 2004, retracing the previous day's faded outline.

◀ McDonald invited passersby to seek free, non-professional advice. While participants and the artist were meeting face-to-face, they communicated through a web "lounge interface," custom chat application, and webcams.

at least, how McDonald frames the piece. Fan delusion or artistic concept, how are we to consider this biographical element? The artist banks on cultural attitudes to celebrity as a central component of her piece. It's not just that she is almost stalking Thornton, but also that this work relies on a particular kind of belief, programs it for reception—the fascinating need to believe in what entertainment media divulge of celebrities' public and private lives, to make them a part of our lives. Here, the camera focuses on an open palm onto which the tip of the drum stick beats "I Love You Billy Bob" in morse code.


Finally, but this is a provisional finality, the site-specific video works commissioned by Toronto's Drake Hotel and broadcast on its own television network operate at the intersection of entertainment culture and boutique hospitality. One video laments Thornton's plastic surgery, the other celebrates his new star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame. In *Billy Bob Got Plastic Surgery—TV Commercial for the Drake Hotel*, 2004, McDonald plasters her face with Billy Bob temporary tattoos—the same design she obsessively drew on her knees in June 2004. The staccato fast-forward editing of her action amplifies its compulsiveness. A succession of short textual fragments, white gothic letters with red, slashed outlines, unemotionally invoke the violence of the surgical knife as they state: "Recently Billy Bob/had plastic surgery/for no good reason/I can only hope/his face will/go back to normal." There is, however, a limit to every infatuation. Thus, Billy Bob led the way to a number of other projects. Love unrequited is fickle, and McDonald moved on to younger, more handsome actors, from Johnny Depp to Vincent Gallo and Daniel Day Lewis. What better way to make an aging actor jealous.

McDonald's one-sided relationship with Thornton has also insinuated itself into the lives of many of the artist's friends and acquaintances. McDonald relates how, knowing of her project, they started sending her info on Thornton, how her celebrity watch became a vector for communication, a kind of social interface. It has also infiltrated web and fan cultures. This is where it becomes multidimensional. A few days ago, I received a two-line email from McDonald reminding me that it was Thornton's 50th birthday—the kind of brief email a thoughtful friend might send to ensure that I don't forget another friend's birthday. Just as celebrities' formerly private lives are now open season for voracious fans, so does any dealing with celebrity find a way into our own private lives. Performances of celebrity privacy in public, their related and multiple public uses, and their infiltration into our own private lives are, in fact, both central to McDonald's project and key dimensions of the critique that she offers.

What are we to make of this? Weren't we trained to believe that the society of the spectacle preempted the very possibility of all genuine relation, subsumed all communication? Aren't any of these relations real? Can't real relations grow out of fiction and projection? Can't we use the mass media as a communication vector, a convenient shorthand, a readymade? McDonald's works accelerate the

spectacle to its collapse, opening onto a range of practices on the other side of cooptation. This also coincides with other cultural phenomena which somehow shift the relation between celebrities and the rest of us—blurring the hard line as it draws it all the more assuredly. Think, for example, of three other recent phenomena—image manipulation unleashed by the personal computer, the culture of sampling, and reality TV.

Another way to address this question is to ask who, precisely, is this "me" in *Me and Billy Bob*? Who is this woman? Is her performance mere narcissism? Is this kind of production different from what most teenagers make with their PCs? The difference is that the woman onscreen functions as a site of projection. "Me" is a shared and transient pronoun, a "me" to be adopted multiply. The other difference is that McDonald offers a gendered critique as the presence and actions of the woman she inserts on screen transcend media conventions. Here, "me" is an active participant, not merely the object of the male protagonist's desires. Her desires drive the scenes, and inflect our experience. Neither celebrity nor re-enactor, neither glamorous nor star-like, she is, powerfully, a vehicle. It is not so much that the media rob us of agency and program our identifications, but rather that they provide tools for the distribution, the collectivization of agency, where one's image can be made to be used by others. Identification knows no boundaries, and cannot be limited to carefully crafted roles. Nor is it always unconscious. It can be made into a reflexive vehicle that allows us to understand cultural determinants, and to craft and construct our identities and behaviors otherwise.

McDonald's video and media works enlist celebrity as a vehicle for a soft critique. This focus on relationship operates both internally within the works, and externally as the artist enlists her presence—in person and on screen—as an interface, a zone of projection for our ultimate fantasies. Tapping into fan culture and "TV boyfriend" phenomena, she lucidly inserts her image, an ordinary girl verging on the pathetic, in momentary and anticlimactic situations where she plays out fantasy scenarios of improbable relationships, fictional encounters, fleeting liaisons. 

Jillian McDonald is a performance and media artist. She lives in Brooklyn. Her work is currently on view in *Wish* at COCA Seattle. It will also be featured in *Synthesis and Distribution: Experiments in Collaboration* at Pace University Galleries in November and at VertexList Gallery, Brooklyn, in December.

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Sylvie Fortin is Editor-in-Chief of ART PAPERS. Her feature on Fatimah Tuggar's digital images was published in the March-April 2005 of ART PAPERS.