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**THE PERFORMANCE AS A MIRROR: CREATIVE AND**  
**THERAPEUTIC ACT IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITY**

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*Abstract*

Through the action implied in the performance, it is possible to activate processes of creation and healing where the body acts as a conductor of intersubjective processes. The significant experience felt through performance helps the individual in the acceptance of its identity acknowledging the existence of an Other. The action implied by the performance involves the staging of the body reflected in a mirror to construct a representation in movement, this new image of the Self experienced through the action is configured within our psyche and shapes our personal and social identity. In the history of recent art we find several performances carried out by women with the aim of denouncing the oppression exerted on them by Patriarchy (Other), recovering the power over their bodies and re-constructing their identity (Self). We highlight cases where the use of the video camera as a mirror is introduced, analysing the therapeutic effects of this tool on the individual performing the action.

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**Keywords:** Art therapy, identity, mirror, performance, video.



## 1. Introduction

This article advocates the use of the performance in front of the video camera as a therapeutic means in the construction of identity. We present the case of the American artist Sadie Benning, who, in the early 90s, produced a corpus of four video-diaries in which she acted in front of the toy camera her father gave her as a gift, turning it into her mirror and confidant of her evolution from child to adulthood.

In the History of Art, we talk about performance to encompass the different expressions of live art that have emerged since the beginning of the 20th century (Guash, 2000, pp. 81-115). Artists belonging to different avant-garde movements devised revolutionary actions in which the core of the artistic work was the subject instead of the object. After World War II, the performance emerges as an artistic proposal linked to the Happening, the Fluxus movement, the Body Art and the Conceptual Art, becoming the artistic expression chosen by many women to confront the viewer with the reality they experienced because of their submission to patriarchy and thus recover power over their bodies.

With the appearance of video, photography and cinema were relegated as mediums to record performances, due to the technical qualities of the former: longer recording time and return of image and voice in real time. The artists soon discovered the mirror possibilities offered by this invention and many of them ended up performing their actions directly in front of the camera within intimate spaces (Rush, 2007 p.72).

The performance is born in the inner space of the individual and is projected through the action to a shared space with the viewer, this transition process conforms a therapeutic space where creation processes take place. The performance as space and therapeutic process provides an intervention alternative in the identification processes of the Self. Through the performance, it is possible to activate processes of identity recognition where the camera becomes the identification mirror capable of projecting the inner self of the individual. From this artistic and therapeutic approach, we intend to investigate how, through the corporal awareness and the significant experience lived through performance, it is possible to rewire identification processes. In the case presented in this article, the camera acts as a spectator and, therefore, the artist faces himself in a closed circuit. Projecting the body through the camera means experiencing it through the projection of the images and voice that the camera brings back as if it were a mirror (Krauss, 1978). Through performance, it is possible to recreate sensory-emotional states, leading to an emotional regression. The camera simultaneously sends images back to us where we can reconstruct or reinvent ourselves, allowing the individual to take hold of their image to accept and recognize themselves.

## 2. Problem Statement

In "the mirror stage as a maker of the function of the *self [je]* as revealed to us in the psychoanalytic experience" Lacan (2009) states that identity is built during childhood. This phase in the development of the child is crucial as it undergoes an essential identification in the conquest of the image of its own body.

*This time, when the mirror stage ends, through the identification with the imago of the counterpart and the drama of primordial jealousy [...], the dialectic, from then on, links the self [je] to socially elaborated situations. It is this moment that turns all the human knowledge decisively into mediation by the desire of the other [...]* (Lacan, 2009, p. 104).

Those individuals whose reflection offered by the mirror (desire of the other) does not conform to what they feel, has a deficient body scheme leading to a disjointed perceptual plane. Marcelli and Braconnier (2005) investigate the development of the individual during adolescence and show how body transformations interfere in their behaviour. Not having a correct body schema results in emotional conflicts and leads to traumas in the processes of identity construction.

*The keys that give man his identity signs lie in emotions and language; emotion and language have biological roots, but they are built and structured thanks to social exchange. It is therefore, thanks to the emotion and through it, that the child, who was a biological being, becomes a social being.*  
(Wallon, 1987, p.60)

Traumatic hysteria arises from traumatic situations or events that generate emotional wounds (Charcot, 1989). These emotional wounds, last over time and survive in the person having an impact on the individual after having suffered them. Cury (2007) deals with trauma through a case study in which he uses Art Therapy as a channel of expression and record of images of the trauma where the individual can empower itself, that is, can "learn to make decisions, to manage the feeling of personal control, critical conscience"(Zimmerman, 2000. p. 47).

### **3. Research Questions**

This article aims at answering the following question: Does the performance in front of the video camera help in the process of identity re-construction? To answer this question, we now present and analyse the case of the video diaries by the artist Sadie Benning.

### **4. Purpose of the Study**

Though this study we try to offer an example of alternative artistic intervention that faces psychological traumas that hinder the development of identity. We present a case study that shows how the *performance* in front of the camera can help the individual in question to overcome trauma and thus take control over his life.

### **5. Research Methods**

For the development of this article, we have brought the theoretical knowledge of the artistic and scientific scope of our respective doctoral research together; Applying them to a descriptive case study of critical situation, the video corpus developed by the artist Sadie Benning between 1989 and 1990.

We present a theoretical analysis that we believe useful to evidence the validity of our proposal: considering performance in front of the video camera as an alternative creative and therapeutic resource in the resolution of traumatic conflicts that hinder the development of identity.

## 6. Findings and Discussion

### 6.1. Presentation and analysis of the case study: Sadie Benning

At the age of 16, Sadie Benning received from her father, the renowned structuralist filmmaker James Benning, a PXL-2000 for Christmas, a toy camera produced by Fisher-Price that allowed recording sound and audio on a cassette tape. The technical deficiencies of this camera turned into an aesthetic revolution known as Pixelvision: the image generated is smaller than usual, producing a black frame around it and the resolution is lower so that the image appears pixelated and with high contrast (Holmlund, 2002) Sadie turned these shortcomings into real expressive force using the camera as a confidant of her experiences and those of her environment.

The four videos comprised in our study corpus, *A New Year* (1989), *Living Inside* (1989), *Me & Rubyfruit* (1990) and *If Every Girl Had a Diary* (1990) still have a lot of trial and error, they are pretty innocent, but are nevertheless endowed with the freshness of the raw material, providing a greater sense of authenticity. The here intuitions and successes, will become proper and well-articulated language in the following films. These pieces are spontaneous, lacking an apparent purpose and recreating fragments of her daily life; reviving them in front of her camera to let a repressed voice heard. This becomes the mirror that makes possible the understanding of who she is and the overcoming of her emotional blockades. These video-making involves a significant experience that allows her to obtain images from her subconscious and understand them as social prejudices instead of absolute truths.

*“-why don't you marry me? I'm not handsome but I'm pretty...*

*-Girls can't get married*

*-Says who?*

*-It's a rule”* (Milliken, 2002, p. 285).

But her evolution is not only technical, throughout the year she shares with us through her diaries, we become witnesses of her development as an adult. Sadie goes from the sweet and innocent childhood to youth, suffering during the journey but yearning to swallow the bitter pill of adolescence as soon as possible. During the creative process of these works, Sadie acquires the "sense of the self" understood by Damasio (1994) as the physiological marks that experience leaves on the body. According to this author, if we stop feeling our body and the transformations it experiences, the consciousness of the self would cease to exist. Sadie's main motivation for beginning these video diaries could be precisely the disconnection she feels between her body and the idea of herself that society has preconfigured for her. In each of these short films, Sadie corroborates that she has a voice of her own to express her emotions "this process of continuous verification, this experience of what our body is doing" (Damasio, 1994, p.207) makes her feel more confident about herself, allowing her to introduce new narrative elements that enrich the message.

*“-I realized how crazy everyone is, And I*

*-realized what a small part I play in it”*. (Benning, 1990)

Through her performances in front of the camera, she manages to change the social isolation she experiences, even among her own family and friends, empowering herself and daring to "come out". She

stops feeling sick or a pervert. She recognizes herself as a lesbian and understands her sexual preferences as something completely natural.

*“- I’m sure some people probably think I’m sick,  
but I’m not a bearylady who jacks off in the library,  
so I guess I’m pretty safe”*. (Benning, 1989)

Benning speaks to the camera endowing it with personality:

*“-Don’t look at me like that!  
You must think that is so funny,  
like it’s a joke or something,  
but I’m not kidding you”* (Benning, 1990)

It looks as if she was interacting with a close friend or even with herself through a mirror. Place that Foucault (1999) puts forward as a space to allow the traumatized self to reconstruct itself through its own gaze.

In the mirror, I see myself where I am not ... I am like a shadow that gives me my own visibility, which allows me to look at myself where I am absent: the mirror’s utopia. But it is also a heterotopia, as the mirror really exists and has, in relation to the place I occupy, a kind of remission effect (...). (Foucault, 1999, p.435).

Sadie records amazing close-ups that are sometimes so close that we can only see one eye, part of the mouth ... fragments of her face that seem abstract and produce the sensation in the viewer of being immersed in the thoughts of the young artist. The tone of her voice, almost a whisper, creates a confidential atmosphere. Her fragmented narration, cut in camera, is totally chaotic and without apparent connection between one sentence and the next, helping even more to create that feeling of dialogue between the narrator - her Self in re-construction - and the intrasubjective character - the perception imposed by her social environment.

*“-Last week I almost laughed  
It could be probably a year ago since I laughed”* (Benning, 1990)

Her films are enclosed within an inner space, her room, which serves both as a shelter and prison. It shows the outer space as an aggressive and overwhelming space she accesses by recording it from the window of her room, with a telephone or through the television.

The videos become confessions to whom she reveals that she does not go to school because she has no friends, she does not feel identified with her classmates. She feels lonely, a deviant ... She tells us that she is willing to scream, but she holds herself back not to cause distress. Before her camera she dares verbalize all her worries, her sexual awakening, her frustrations and fears.

For her narrative purposes, she uses the assembly of written texts, performances in front of the camera, creation of characters through costumes, the personification of dolls as well as all kinds of toys and products of the American consumer society (music, newspapers, television, films...).

The game is defined as "transitional space" imbued with symbolisms... it is a reality in itself that wipe off the borders between external and internal realities. (López and Martínez, 2006, pp. 22-25)

## 6.2. Performance in front of the camera as a therapeutic alternative

The action involved in the performance as a therapeutic method offers a channel for the release of emotions that language cannot encompass. Sadie experiments recording her face and discovers in it a means of expression that allows her to de-construct her body; Immersed in her game, she establishes a sensitive dialogue with her image that leads her to a state of introspection where creation takes over her selective attention while blocking any source of information unrelated to the moment experienced. During the performance, she creates new bodily perceptions that stimulate her sensory system and establishes new neuronal connections at the same time she voices buried feelings expressed through the use of symbolic images.

The work corpus of Sadie Benning presented in this article is in line with the latest contributions in the field of neurology that investigate the neuronal plasticity that demonstrates how significant experience leaves its mark on the neural network modifying and transforming it. Ansermet and Magistretti (2006) state how this mark is conferred through mechanisms of great plasticity where the experience builds an internal reality.

Each of our experiences are unique and have a unique impact. By the way, plasticity is a form of determinism in itself, but while this kind of determination of the subject is operating, the latter frees itself from the genetic determinism ... *The plasticity would be, then, nothing less but the mechanism by which each subject and each brain are unique* (Ansermet and Magistretti, 2006, pp. 14-15).

When Sadie interprets and visualizes herself, she perceives an emotional contrast between the state of liberation provided by her creative activity with the camera and the state of oppression experienced in her daily life. This state of pleasure and displeasure gives rise to new marks in her neural network (Damasio, 1994) that favour the resolution of trauma allowing her to bring fiction into reality (Emunah, 1994).

The dramatic performance is an intermediate internal state, an intermediary between fantasy and reality. The modality is fiction, but the experience is very real. This fictitious modality allows us to do things that are still out of our reach in real life, such as voicing out feared emotions, changing behavioural patterns or exhibiting new traits. Once we have experienced them, although in a fictitious way, these new experiences can become a part of the repertoire of our real life (Emunah, 1994, p.27).

The content of these video diaries could identify a large number of teenagers in the Western Culture during the period of formation of their identity, when everything seems to be against them.

Benning becomes the voice not of a generation, but of a stage in the development of the individual; in the voice of adolescence. In the years to come, Sadie will use the resources she has learned to continue creating her work, modifying the approach and extending her means of expression to focus on new focuses of interest. We would dare to highlight in this change her definitive entry into adulthood and the overcoming of her identity crisis.

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