IDENTITY

BLACK BOX

Decoding the Art Work
of Martin Gantman

Martin Gantman

0,000,001,155

Tracking Identity: Identity 0,000,001,155   2007

I had this grandiose idea that I would gather enough photographs of individual faces that the faces, side by side, would eventually blend into an infinite visual continuum, that there would be so little discernible difference between one face and the next that the facial types would become indistinguishable one from another. I was assuming that this would be a way of showing that peoples' facial identities are less significant in terms of defining their personalities than other more important character attributes, and I was hoping to illuminate the role of facial identity as a factor within the problem of social prejudice.

Identity issues have been a major factor in my life. My father escaped from Russia (really the Ukraine area of the USSR) when he was 15 years old. He and his father landed in Mexico with the plan that when they were settled they would bring to America my grandmother and my father's four siblings. Either because of my grandmother's inability to get out of the USSR, or because she didn't want to leave, that plan didn't work. My grandmother, uncles and aunts remained in Russia, and my father and grandfather never saw the rest of their family again. My father was incredibly bitter about this, and possessed a fierce hatred for the Russian Communists, but he also developed a sense of fairness for people in the world, a populist ideal, that he passed on to me.

*Inconsequential Fence*   2013

In 1993 I moved to West Hollywood, California, a very active and politically progressive city. The population at this time was about 40 percent gay and there was a lot of activity around gender equality and marriage. I had involved myself in a bit of political activity in places where I had previously lived – Santa Cruz, Santa Monica, and Venice, California – but in West Holly-wood, I had even more motivation to be informed about and engage in contemporary issues because my wife was serving on the West Hollywood City Council at this time.

The Odalisque Suite: Velazquez   1997

This exposure to the West Hollywood gay community was partially responsible for my creation of *The Odalisque Suite* of 1997, a project about gender and sexual perception, but in 2004 I decided to deal with the issue of identity in a more universal way than I had in the earlier project. Perhaps the idea was incubated by my feelings about the mistreatment of minorities and immigrants after 9/11, feelings that tied back to the experience of my father. As a Jew in Russia, he hadn't ever been fully integrated or accepted.
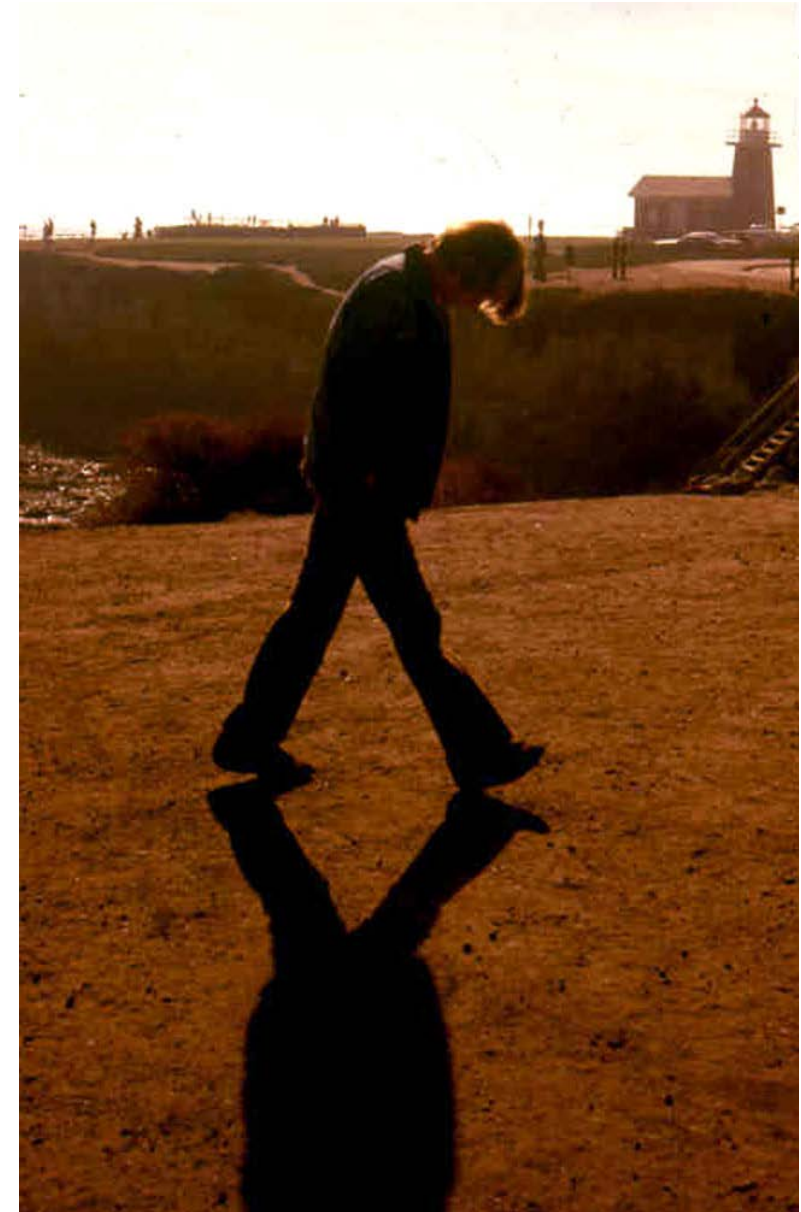
Male Call   1979

The issue of identity has always been pronounced in the construction of my self-identity. I have difficulty knowing, much less accepting, precisely who I am, and unreservedly accepting others, particularly those who immediately appear different from me. I personally experience this challenge in terms of competition, comparing myself to others, which ultimately relates to how I feel about my own self-worth.

It is my experience that many of us have, in some way or other, a latent bias against those who are different from ourselves. I find an interesting question to be why this seemingly innate attitude occurs. But I know it is important to deal with this kind of issue if we are, first, to become equitable citizens of the world, and second, to ever have a chance at a non-discriminatory society. Personally, I continually struggle with the prejudicial ideas that were handed down and ingrained in me by my family and whatever uninformed beliefs they held.
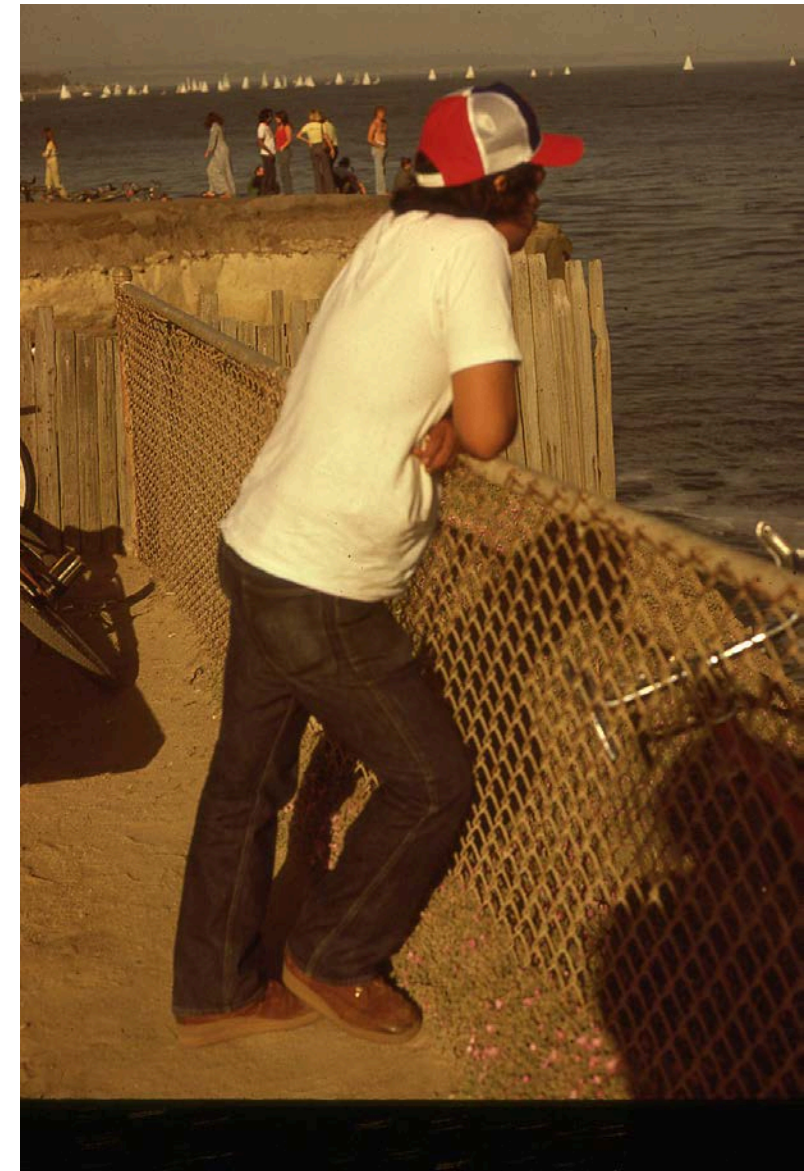
Male Call   1979

So I came up with the idea of using faces as a way of portraying these thoughts about iden-
tity. After several months of collecting profiles for the identity project, which I called *Tracking
Identity,* I had completed only about 120 images. Then in 2007, Nena Amsler and Bill Rabe at
HAUS Gallery in Pasadena, California, accepted the project for exhibition. I was thinking that
I would just frame these few pieces I had and space them in a horizontal row around the gal-
lery walls, but Bill came up with the idea of papering the gallery and some of the ceiling with
hundreds, if not thousands, of images. I thought the idea was a great one, but I was definitely
confounded about how I was going to gather so many images, and then convert them onto
paper, in time for the exhibition.

Tracking Identity   HAUS Gallery 2007

Tracking Identity   HAUS Gallery 2007

My original process for the project had been to casually photograph people when I had the opportunity. I would then transfer the images to Photoshop, delineate the profile, and convert it to white on a black background. The way I saw the process was that I was actually carving the person's profile out of a black square, and sometimes having to trace the image in Photoshop became very much that kind of experience. But now, faced with having to step up the process considerably, I called everyone I knew and asked them to get out, take as many pictures of themselves and others as they could, and send them to me.

0,000,000,033

Tracking Identity: Identity 0,000,000,033   2007

0,000,001,144

Tracking Identity: Identity 0,000,001,144   2007

A consistent problem with the digital photographs was that if the facial color and the background behind the faces blended too closely, the pixels along the profile edge in Photoshop would merge, and I would be unable to develop a sharp enough line for the interface between the white paper ground and the black ink. Because of this problem I knew that many of the photographs people would send me would be unusable. There had to be many more photographs taken than what would be required to cover the walls.

I suppose the above process, having other people take pictures and send them to me, brings up questions about artistic authorship or photographic purity. That did occur to me at the time, but I never saw this project as being about photography, or about my taking the pictures. That is an issue I will leave for photographic purists. Rather, the conceptual emphasis had always been on acquiring images, and it was only important that these images were of real people and that there were no duplicates.

I had actually been more fascinated by the fantastical idea of capturing the images of everyone in the world, which, because the population is constantly changing, is clearly an unattainable task. It is one of those dream projects, perhaps a delusional one, but also provocatively challenging. How to solve something that you know has no practical solution? If you decide to proceed based on what exists in a particular instant of time, then the project is more about time than about identity. So, knowing that this was not the point of the project, I decided to let that problem go and just concentrate on gathering the necessary number of images.

Still, it mildly plagues me when I think about it. Really, you start out thinking, not that you want to gather a lot of images, but that you want to capture all of the images in the world; knowing that the moment you thought that, the sample had changed; some subjects no longer existed, and other new ones had come into being. I am sure there are ways to execute that idea, about capturing everything within an instant of time, make it known and visible, but alas, for me, it most certainly became another lost idea; a project thought that resides lower and lower in my stack of potential projects as time proceeds.

Ultimately I ended up with over 1,150 images, each cleaved out of a 6"x6" black square on an 11" square white page. Every image had been assigned an Identity Number that contained enough digits to encompass the billions that would be necessary to accomplish the impossible goal of the project, photographing everyone in the world. These numbers took a form such as Identity 0,000,000,059.

There were a couple of interesting by-products of the project. First, at the reception for the exhibition, many of the attendees requested that their image be included in the project, so we got a camera and began photographing them. Each new image received an Identity Number and was eventually included in the project. And later PhantomGalleries L.A. installed the show onto the windows of a commercial building on a street corner in downtown Long Beach, California. The images filled about seven or eight very large storefront windows, and it was interesting to note the reactions of passersby. I particularly appreciated the visual of a profile walking on the street reflecting in the glass in front of all of the anonymous profiles behind the window.

Tracking Identity   Phantom Gallery, Long Beach, California 2008

Tracking Identity   Phantom Gallery, Long Beach, California 2008

Tracking Identity   Phantom Gallery, Long Beach, California 2008

But as with so many projects – and this is what is really interesting about art-making – the intention or the conceptual motive often doesn't work, and one must recognize, accept, and move forward with new information and perspective that may appear during the process of executing the project. In this case, after commingling these thousand-plus facial profiles, I realized that my hypothesis was just wrong, and that no matter how many faces I incorporated into the larger project, there would always be certain basic or unique facial types that would be readily distinguished from others.

Fortunately, and this is my practice when presenting most of my projects, I generally attempt to minimize my potential bias, and try merely to present the findings of my searches neutrally. I think this procedure allows room for others to interpret the information for themselves. There is also a personal benefit to this method, which is that I get to hear reactions to the work that are often a surprise or that add a dimension that I never suspected would arise. In this case, since my assumption, or aspiration, about the profiles merging into a continuum was just wrong, I was saved chagrin and public embarrassment by having kept quiet about the initial concept.

I have been asked whether this kind of process is really a function of art, that is, whether setting out to prove a preconceived idea is a legitimate artistic goal, though I am not certain that I was primarily trying to prove something rather than simply to understand it. There is a subtle difference here, which is dependent upon intent. In my mind I was producing a visual phenomenon that I hoped, along the way, would illuminate a conclusion that I desired. That is art. Trying to prove to myself that my thought was correct? Not certain. The difference for me is in whether I corrupt the process by sticking to the preconception, or whether I am open to the process and to whatever direction it might want to take.

Artists explore and they think. It is sometimes difficult to separate those two activities. Artists intending to make a point? There is definitely historical precedent for that. Joseph Kosuth, Hans Haacke, Art and Language, perhaps even minimalists such as Donald Judd and Sol Lewitt, were making preconceived points. When Braque and Picasso were studying observational space, or even before them Cezanne, or Manet and Monet, along with the other Impressionists, were they simply portraying what they saw, or did they have a notion about how they were presenting what they thought?

To be emphatic, there is a line that I will not cross: it is the one that prejudices observation and presentation to conform to a bias or a preconception instead of what has appeared through the art-making process. Even then, though, I cannot determinedly state that favoring a preconception is not art. Consider Duchamp and his readymades.
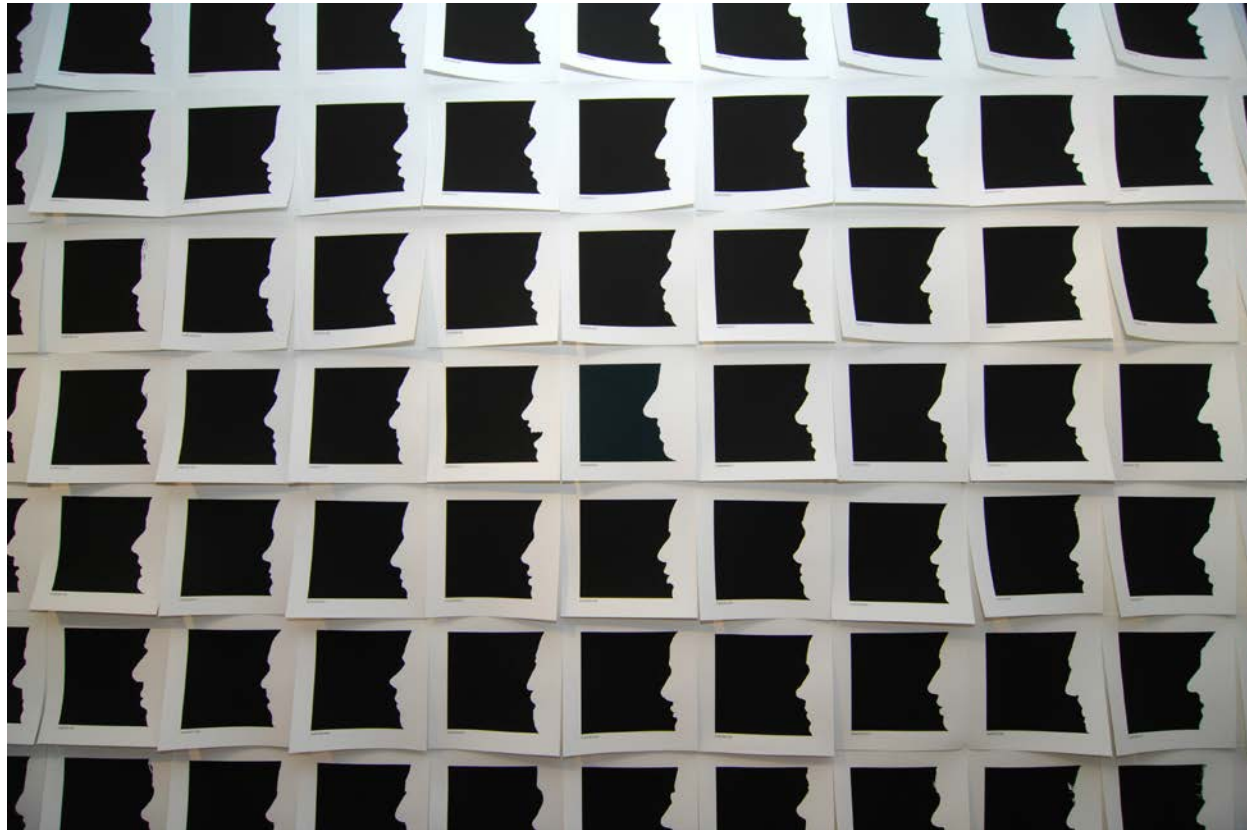
Tracking Identity (Installation detail)   HAUS Gallery 2007

I learned subsequent to my project that facial recognition programs, such as those that law enforcement agencies use, work similarly to the original ideas I had about my Identity project by comparing generic characteristics of millions of faces, narrowing down the possibilities until the program arrives at satisfying results. Still, I am not certain that this software resolves the question about similarities, or if the programs, themselves, actually recognize basic facial differences and branch off into those particular types to resolve their searches.

In terms of the exhibition of *Tracking Identity* at HAUS Gallery, the project's presentation became an array of exceptional images whose individual uniqueness was, at first, not recognized. People would walk into the gallery and be struck by a geometric grid of black squares overlaying the walls and ceiling of the gallery space. The papers on the walls were tacked only at the top two corners, so that they lifted off of the walls at their bottom edge, conveying the appearance of fluttering in a breeze. It wasn't until you moved closer that you could recognize more complex shapes, and then the unique faces.

And in spite of my previous comments about my concept being inherently incorrect, the installation actually accomplished what I had originally desired. That is, the allure of the presentation created an atmosphere, an array of images, whose overall effect demonstrated the fact that no singular typology is more significant than any other – that no facial type detracted from the beauty of the overall population.

There is one additional aspect to this project that I haven't yet mentioned. The use of the word "profile" has meanings and connotations other than the one that I have been using here. Profiling has to do with taking aspects of a personality and concentrating them into a singular viewpoint. I addressed this issue, as I noted, by assigning a number to each image, hoping to suggest a connection to crime photos and other forms of cultural and official classification that can contribute toward initiating or reflecting bias.

These numbers reference numerous classification systems; beginning with the creation by Alphonse Bertillon, a noted French police officer, of a system of identification based on measurements of physical body parts, to Sir Francis Galton, a Victorian polymath who, among many more interesting accomplishments, devised a system of classification of fingerprints, and to the East German police, the Stasis, who created an intensive system of files about millions of people after World War II. Of course nowadays we have absolutely little or no idea to what extent digital classification systems exist about each of us, compiled by organizations throughout all aspects of our society.

I did not originally intend to make an issue of this duality – the inherent beauty of facial features against the potential ugliness of secret classification systems. But the issue arrived unbidden, along the flow of the process.
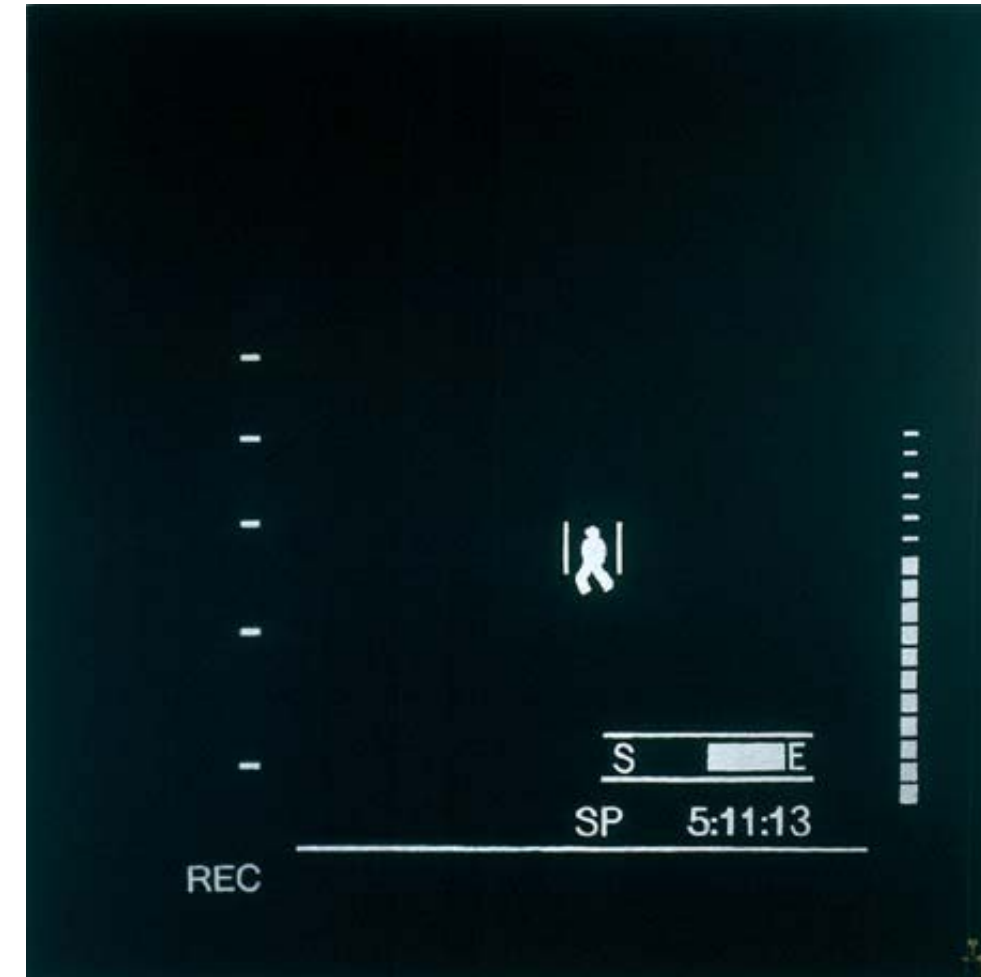
Tracking Project: Personal Tracker   2006

There are numerous bewildering matters of identity that each of us encounters on a daily basis. First is dealing with our selves. We all spend time considering our mental and physical selves; how we can improve or alter in ways that we think will benefit us. Nor do I have to fill in anyone about how broad and complicated is the issue of defining ourselves within the dense and complex societies that we inhabit. Then there is the other, or others. How many ways do we influence each other, and others' perceptions of us, through the ever increasing modes of contact that we immerse ourselves in? I think a simple picture, even just an outline in black and white, can point us toward all of that, and perhaps motivate us to contemplate thoughts about similarities and difference.

Male Call 14   1980

0,000,000,057

Tracking Identity: Identity 0,000,000,057   2007

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