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ALTERED EGOS:
SUBJECTIVITY IN CONTEMPORARY AUSTRALIAN VIDEO PERFORMANCE

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Abstract: This paper explores the use of alter ego in the work of three Australian video performance artists. The objective of this research is to identify the various ways in which those fictional characters reflect or embody aspects of the artist’s experience. The work of Eric Bridgeman, Kate Mitchell and Heath Franco are analysed in order to determine how each artist imbues their alter egos with their own subjective agency and how this reflects the unstable nature of identity itself.

The video performance works of Eric Bridgeman, Kate Mitchell and Heath Franco present three significantly varied implementations of alter ego. While their invented characters each engage with issues specific to their practice, each artist's performance of alter ego brings with it issues from their subjective experience. These take the form of specific social observations and criticism, symbolic representations of a personal worldview, and even the entrenchment of personal traits within their characters. Eric Bridgeman’s constructed persona provides a vehicle for the artist to share his observations of racial distinctions in Australia, as well as his own experience of cultural uncertainty. Kate Mitchell’s use of costume provides a ubiquitous avatar through which she expresses a specific philosophy. Heath Franco’s subjective engagement with his fictional characters imbues them with his own presence by the very act of their performance. This paper will examine the use of alter ego in the work of each artist as well as examples from art history in an attempt to illuminate its ability to divulge subjective issues and ultimately call into question the nature of identity itself.

The work of Eric Bridgeman consistently engages with issues of identity and culture. His 2008 series The Sport and Fair Play of Aussie Rules seeks to destabilise the myriad stereotypes of Australia’s sense of national identity (Davis, 2011). The series features the video performance work Triple X Bitter and introduces Bridgeman’s alter ego Boi Boi The Labourer. Undeniably white and clad in workingman’s clothes, steel cap boots, hardhat and earmuffs, Boi Boi is the picture of the stereotypical Australian masculine ideal. A “camp, football-loving builder’s labourer”, he gets the job done (Davis, 2011, p. 13). In Triple X Bitter his task is to blow up and fill an inflatable pool, while his cohorts get drunk, fool around and encourage two black girls to wrestle (Starr, 2010, p. 62). It is difficult to miss the emphasis that Bridgeman places on skin colour. In his videos this is exaggerated by the application of paint directly to the skin. This is important, as it seems to operate solely as a strict marker of distinction and bears no correspondence to the performer’s original skin tone. Boi Boi, or Bridgeman, is white. When others are designated black, they are painted jet black. There are no browns or beiges, just black and white.

This polarisation of skin colour may reference Bridgeman’s own ordeals growing up with a mixed national heritage clearly referenced in his skin tone and features. His mother being from Papua New Guinea and his father a Caucasian from Queensland, Bridgeman nevertheless felt that he bore no difference to anyone else. However, after being taunted with names like ‘Abo’ and ‘Blacky’, Bridgeman began to question his own cultural identity as well as the entrenched racial generalisations that can be encountered in Australia. As he recalls, “It didn’t make sense to me. Was it my skin colour? I’m...
hardly that black. I thought. ‘I’m more of a caramel’. I came to realise that it didn’t matter to the others black was black’ (Starr 2010, p. 62). Bridgeman’s extreme skin colour distinctions mirror those that he perceives and encourages in certain areas of Australian culture. Bridgeman’s fillates and satisties these simplistic racial categorisations in order to highlight and interrogate their presence. By making these defining judgements painfully obvious he emphasises their weight. His treatment of skin colour demonstrates the contested point of view he perceives by exaggerating it. Gone are the subtleties of tone and appearance that comprise a mixed culture society, instead Bridgeman reproduces a view where a myriad of tones are brutally rendered to the nearest pale or black or white.


in the work of Kate Mitchell, the use of costume can be conceived as a discussion in which she explores universal themes as well as a specific personal worldview. Her task-based performances all share an undeniable trait in their emphasis on labour (Feary, 2012). In Mitchell’s video we typicall see the artist dressed in a ‘work-worn denim ensemble’ (Feary, 2013, p. 451). She goes about her task with state resolve, neither oblivious to nor afraid of its quite real dangers (Faller, 2009). These tasks have cloud simplicity akin to that of a cartoon, with their presence as a visual and audio performer exaggerating their violence (Feary, 2012). For example, in the 2007 work ‘I Am Not A Hole’ she features in her customary denim shirt and pants, in a corner tiny room, and proceeds to saw a hole in the floor around herself so that she eventually falls through, narrowly missing the edges and deftly dropping the sharp saw before passing through the gap. In a work from 2012,

Getting Through It, she performs the back-breaking task of climbing up through a hole in the floor with the help of a ladder, bag over on an adjacent hole in the ceiling, and proceeds to climb up through it. The camera then scans upward and the process is repeated indefinitely. Regardless of the infinitely futile nature of her tasks and their inherent dangers her character continues, unphased and resolute.

Mitchell’s video performance works are archetypical and comical tasks performed without question, more or less happily, but for no apparent reason. Her destituted alter ego can be seen as a means of subjective identification similar to that with which any person identifies themselves by their profession, with phrases like “I am a lawyer.” “I am a Doctor.” “I am an Artist” and so on. This echoes Nietzsche’s line in On the Genealogy of Morals. As he states, there is no “truly” behind doing, effecting, becoming; “the deed is merely a fiction added to the deed – the deed is everything” (Nietzsche, 1969, p. 43). Mitchell’s worker is the objective vehicle for her to express a specific personal worldview, one that is simplified through its symbolic replication in her tasks. As her ideas are transmuted into symbolic gestures, her worldview is externalised and becomes a universal claim. This universality is evidenced by her costume decision of denim, the fabric of choice for the ubiquitous worker. By dressing herself up as such, she becomes a generic, nameless avatar for all and one. The cartoonish nature of her settings reinforce this: they are simplistic, devoid of detail and the ambiguities of the complex human network of society at large. This is a place where things happen, stuff gets done, and that’s about it. There is a curious paradox in Mitchell’s work. Her willingness to complete or reduce the task at hand reveals an eagerness to embrace the possibilities of use, however the reiteration of these tasks, their ambivalence and dubious productivity indicates recognition of life’s ultimate futility and ‘Stypshke monotonounomal’ (Feary, 2013, p. 45). Despite Mitchell’s insight into the drudgery of life there is no ultimate resignation in her work. Rather, her videos instigate a willingness to endure whatever life dishes out with ste, even happy resolve. In 9 5 (2009), Mitchell features standing in the middle of an outback clearing, this time clad in a blue worker’s cap and denim cut-off shorts due to the intense heat of her setting. The work documents every minute of an eight-hour day spent standing in the exact same spot.

The work of Heath Franco takes the use of the alter ego to the extreme of subjectivity. His videos present microcosms of suburban reality often based within the frame of a singular domestic scene. A camera, or the implied camera of the editing software, pans and scans the image to reveal the presence of economically costumed characters that emerge through various portals on the screen and fervently repeat their allotted phrase, often to the point of meaningless. The relationship of Franco’s characters to the artist is not explicit. They are observations of other people, often oined at the western Sydney pub where he works (Taylor, 2013). Their catch phrases originate from overheard snippets of conversation and seem to be arbitrarily chosen. It is only rarely, and often by chance, that associations can be made between the characters and their settings. It is perhaps only in the process of performance that any connection can be made between artist, subject and meaning. Franco’s work relies heavily on the use of the green screen. This allows the artist to perform his characters alone in the controlled environment of the studio, and apply them in post-production to their place in the video. It is here that he connects with his character and their laborious tenacities. As the artist states in an interview, “I’m always working by myself, at every stage of the work I’m alone. It’s very, very self-centred and it’s a lot, a lot”, (Crawford, 2012). Alone in the studio, blinded by video lights, Franco repeats interchangeable phrases until they take on new meaning and then lose it altogether. In this way his performance “becomes submerged by the tribulations of the everyday.”


Sean-donate high-definition digital video 16-9, stereo sound 10 mins 45 secs.

COURTSEY THE ARTIST AND GALERIE PERSOOG, SYDNEY.

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of conversation, his process of performance infuses his experience in their enactment.

The artists discussed in this paper were chosen to evidence the many ways in which they imbue themselves in their work. They give testament to how subjective issues manifest in the characters that they inhabit, regardless of whether or not this is intentional. This facet of performance art, and probably art in general, relates the curious situation whereby it is possible, and perhaps even easier, to reveal aspects of oneself through the embodiment of the other. This situation is reflected in precursors to performance video art such as Marcel Duchamp's drag persona, Rose Selavy and Pierre Molinier's photographs as a gender-ambiguous alter ego. With Duchamp's incorination as a coquetish femme-fatale, staring down the viewer in a series of photographs made by Man Ray, we do not explicitly see Duchamp embodying any kind of explicit personal desire. Rather, with his alter ego, Duchamp performs his artistic ambition to destabilise artistic authorship. "Duchamp's masquerade/drag as a woman produces an ambivalence that allows for resistance to... authorial invested constructions of 'Duchamp'" (Jones, 1994, p. 159). In the photographs of Pierre Molinier, the artist performs as a sexually ambiguous character in a private spectacle of drag. His use of early photo manipulation techniques turns his body into one defying sexual classification. The series, rather than reflecting any outward desire for self communication, represents a personal spectacle of narcissism: "Molinier places himself on a stage of self-appreciation, like the adolescent school girl dressing up for the mirror, but many times more perverse" (Geczy, 2013, p. 115). Both Duchamp and Molinier employ alter ego to their own ends, Duchamp as just another medium to interrogate the nature of artistic production and Molinier as a form of private psycho-sexual performance.

In the work of Judith Butler, the exploration of the issues surrounding identity is crucial. She argues that the core form of identity is sexual identity, or gender (Brady, 2011, p. 26). For Butler, this sexual identity is not something that is fixed or essential, it is something that is performed over time. "Gender is not a question of having or being, but of doing, and it is something one is compelled to do in order to be constituted as a recognisable human subject" (Brady, 2011, pp. 44-45). This gender performativity is not entirely ambiguous, for gender to be intelligible it must be expressed in terms of socially sanctioned expressions of sexuality, or at least those with precedent (Butler, 1993). In other words, we perform our gender like we speak a language, we can say whatever we want but it must adhere to the rules of language in order to make sense. For the artists discussed in this paper alter ego is that language. They employ the symbolic identity of their characters to divulge aspects of themselves, whether this is an intentional strategy or an effect of the engagement. Bearing in mind the work of these artists, if Butler's logic were to be taken to its conclusion we encounter a quandary. If gender, the essence of identity, is continually performed, then it must have no central, immutable core. If our identity is essentially the combined impression of our affects then the self is in a constant state of flux, forever being generated as it is performed. This notion is not at odds with the issues discussed in this paper. It complements the idea that there is comfort to be found inside the skin of an invented, fictional other. The way in which these artists communicate themselves through their alter egos is symptomatic of Butler's idea of the performance of identity. It makes just as much sense to locate the self in the embodiment of an invention as it does to imagine some kind of permanent truth to one's character, one vessel is as good as any. One lie is as good as the next.

References


