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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 these 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.



Eric Bridgeman, *Triple X Bitter*, 2008
Production Still

Courtesy the Artist and Gallerysmith, Melbourne

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 encounters in certain areas of Australian culture. Bridgeman infiltrates and satirises 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 contrasted 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 pole of black or white.



Kate Mitchell, *Getting Through It*, 2012
single channel high definition video 16:9, no sound
Courtesy the Artist and Chalk Horse, Sydney

In the work of Kate Mitchell, the use of costume can be conceived as a dualism 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 videos we typically see the artist clad in a "work-worn denim ensemble" (Feary, 2013, p. 45). She goes about her task with stoic resolve, neither oblivious to nor afraid of its quite real dangers (Fuller, 2009). These tasks have visual simplicity akin to that of a cartoon, with her presence as a flesh and blood performer exaggerating their violence (Feary, 2012). For example, in the 2007 work *I Am Not A Joke* she features in her customary denim shirt and jeans, in a comically 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,

rather than playing on the well-worn pun of the 'work' of the artist, 9-5 seems to indicate an acknowledgement of the fleeting nature of life, "to let us know that in the end the ultimate rulers are the seconds, minutes, hours and days" (Fuller, 2009, p. 19). It serves as a reminder of the palpable existence of time and how it can easily become subsumed by the tribulations of the everyday.



Heath Franco, *DREAM HOME*, 2012
dual-channel high definition digital video 16:9, stereo sound
10 mins 45 secs
Courtesy the Artist and Galerie Pompon, Sydney

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. The camera, or the implied camera of the editing software, pans and scans the image to reveal the presence of eccentrically costumed characters that emerge through various portals on the screen and fervently repeat their allocated phrase, often to the point of meaninglessness. The relationship of Franco's characters to the artist is not explicit. They are observations of other people, often sighted 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 meaning can be made between artist, subject and 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 utterances. 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 bit... sickening" (Crawford, 2012). Alone in the studio, blinded by video lights, Franco repeats interchangeable phrases until they gain new meaning and then lose it altogether. In this way his performances "allow the unconscious to manifest itself" (Cook, 2013, p. 40). Franco admits to having no prior agenda with his characters, they seem to succeed or fail based on strengths that cannot be anticipated and manifest during their inhabitation by the artist (Crawford, 2012). Franco's characters are simultaneously creations based on outward observations and the product of an internal feedback loop. He is mimicking what he sees but cannot identify with them until they are internalised.

It is this very internalisation of his characters' random outbursts that tempts so many commentators to see his works as manifestations of the ID, giving expression to the immediate desires of the inner child. As one states, key to his work "is a re-enactment of the suffocatingly humid desires of a man-child... caught in a space outside the social... where the public self crumbles into appalling pieces" (Cook, 2013, p. 40). The childishness of Franco's work comes to the fore in two of his latest videos, *Dream Home* (2012) and *Home Town* (2014). Although all of his works operate within the specific setting of suburban Australia and therefore the family home, these most recent works contain an emphasis on the experiences of childhood. They focus on the closed bubble of experience that shapes every individual. The near endless repetition of words and phrases is reminiscent of mid-week boredom of school holidays that generate so many strange and pointless acts. Cook notes, "There's that old saying 'my child could do that. In this case, their child probably does do that, like we all did'" (Cook, 2013, p. 41). In *Dream Home* this bubble is made tangible by one character, a child, who picks up a phone, dials a number and frantically requests a wasted sandwich. We are not shown if there is anyone at the other end, and it doesn't matter, the child repeats the request drowning out any possibility of a reply. Another character, a freckled boy with locks of curly bright red hair, repeatedly punches his doll chanting the phrase "stop hitting yourself." Franco admits to identifying with this character in particular, as its situation bears a similarity to his solitary creative process (Crawford, 2012). While Franco's characters are intentionally objective, based on observations and overheard snippets

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 Selary* and Pierre Molinier's photographs as a gender-ambiguous alter ego. With Duchamp's incarnation as a coquettish 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... authorially invested constructions of 'Duchamp'" (Jones, 1994, p. 150). 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" (Gecezy, 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 ambivalent, 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, atomisable core. If our identity is essentially the combined impression of our affectations 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 compliments 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.

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