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Identities and Identifications: Politicized Uses of Collective Identities

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Shifting Focus:

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Nicholas Chilvers (b. 1975) is a Melbourne based artist, exploring notions of intimacy, identity, and subjectivity through film and video, as well as live performance artworks in the social space of the art gallery. Chilvers' artworks choreograph scenarios in which relations between people are played out, investigating the manner in which movement, musicality, pathos and humor, may bring about internal transformations and reveal identity in the context of contemporary art. Nick Chilvers is a current PhD candidate at Melbourne's RMIT University.

Identity. Fact or Fluid?

ʌɪˈdɛntɪti/ IDENTITY
noun

1.

The fact of being whom or what a person or thing is.

2.

A close similarity or affinity.[1]

Who's that boy?

This morning I boarded the train and threw myself into the first seat I could find, as I always do. My thoughts were occupied by a conundrum, a problem to do with identity. What is it, what is its purpose and how does it function? I have always imagined identity as something that is located internally, one's core individual inner self. At the beginning of my PhD, my research was focussed on the contagious nature of human feelings, and the manner in which the inner self may be revealed through dramatic expression and empathic response in the field of contemporary performance based art. Every time I returned to the idea of core interiority however, it increasingly appeared to produce an incomplete dialectic. Does identity simply 'happen' because we exist? Is it fixed, or is it fluid, like an active continuum that shifts and changes as it is bounced about among people in social space? Is our sense of internality only complete when we imagine ourselves in relation to other people?

At the next station a figure boarded the train and began to move toward me. At first I noticed his oversized belt buckle reflecting the morning sun. Then I noticed his dusty old jeans and his cowboy boots. My eye moved discursively over this figure and its accoutrements. Given how involved I was in my thoughts, the figure presented itself to me merely as an abstract form moving in space. Eventually my gaze settled on the face and I became aware that this person was looking back at me. Suddenly I had been caught out. Instantly, the figure morphed from a moving human shape into an identity. Of course I didn't know his name, where he came from, if he liked boys or girls, or any specific details of that nature, but I did know his boots said "urban cowboy" and that he had noticed me

looking, and returned my gaze with an ambiguous expression of his own. My curious eye had lingered and I had inadvertently identified him as I assessed his outfit. I had made him curious, yet self-conscious. He sat opposite me, and I immediately adjusted my position to make room. It was obvious we were both very aware of each other's presence. We watched each other carefully through our peripheral vision. At one point, I was stroking my beard, our eyes met again and he was doing exactly the same thing. Realising we were mirroring each other, we simultaneously dropped our hands into our laps and returned our attention to 'nothing in particular' outside the window. Our bodies had somehow aligned in a mimetic synthesis. I had not been aware of myself until I become conscious of my relationship to him. A spatial and temporal relationship had produced a moment of intensity, a kind of intimacy, brought about by the physiology of our mutual sensitivities. Our feelings were friendly yet guarded, both pleasurable and slightly awkward. We weren't flirting, it was simpler than that, but there was a kind of dance happening between the figure and me on the train, even when we sat completely still. Who was he, and where did he get those boots?

Your identity is not your own, not solely anyway. It is a perpetual transformation that is informed and performed as it mingles and meshes with other identities. It is not static or solitary. Rather it is social, and it shifts according to where you are or whom you are with. My research seeks to contribute to the discourse around the manner in which we construct identity as we find points of connection with the social world, performing our similarities and differences. Where do I fit and how do I relate? How do I relate to my pop idols, my political heroes, my family, my work colleagues or the anonymous figure sitting opposite me on the train? Identity is located in the slippages between 'you' and 'me.' It is an empathic exchange that both reflects, and is reflected in our relations, our environments and the situations in which we find ourselves. It is a negotiation, with which we attempt to create a fixed point where we may contextualize and locate ourselves. Max van Manen refers to the engagement of these relationships as a phenomenology of practice,[2] which he offers as "*an ethical corrective to the technological modalities of contemporary life.*"[3] Yet I propose that technology and digital camera/screen culture functions by extending the phenomenology of relations through what I name Remote Relationships, allowing you to engage a kind of intimacy via the screen. From a very early age I would enact such identifications while imitating popular performers such as Prince, watching Top of the Pops on TV.

In 1984, British drag performer Marilyn Peter Robinson visited Australia to perform his hit song *Calling Your Name.* Visualise, not the performance itself, but me, a nine year-old boy on the sofa with a bag of crisps, watching on television. Affecting both masculinity and femininity in equal measurement, Marilyn was the very image of the beautiful Hermaphroditus. His movements and the adornments of his body formed a spectacle with which he displayed subjectivity, and signalled a proximity to a particular social scene in London, known as 'The Blitz Club.' All the gender benders and new romantics frequented that club. Grace Jones, Boy George, David Bowie, I wanted to be just like them. I slipped my tiny nine year-old feet into my Mum's sling back kitten heels and danced in front of the television in a joyous ritual of connectedness, imitating the performer while applying my own appropriations as though the screen formed a kind of mirror. I saw myself reflected in Marilyn, and reflected from the TV screen itself. There was a particular vulnerability that underpinned the constructed persona that I identified with. I too felt different and strange, becoming aware at such a young age that the performance of gender was a material that could be moulded and shaped according to my own sensibility.

Back at school I would display this constructed 'me' in relation to the affinities I felt with Marilyn, copying his effeminate pathos, wearing eyeliner and painting my nails. I thought the other kids would love it. Many of my schoolmates however were beginning to make identifications that differed from mine, that of the uber-masculine sportsman, the alpha male, and they performed their differences through the ritual of schoolyard bullying. So one must construct a new mode of operation compatible with the cultural model of how young boys conduct themselves in the school grounds, a model of self that avoided antagonism and existed somewhere between the 'me' I wanted to be and the role I was expected to play. Identity becomes more complex as we negotiate all our relations, which are infinitely varied and diverse and subject to change. Intuitively however I knew that the bullies did not dislike me, rather they found me somewhat fascinating and exciting, and I felt the same way about them. Identifications are active and multifarious. I appreciated what it was to be masculine and athletic, and they knew what it was to be glamorous and performative. The differences between us were located in the performance of gender, and did not reflect our real feelings toward each other and our respective identities.

Judith Butler explores the notions of gender performativity and the materiality of sex and identity in her texts *Gender Trouble*[4] and *Bodies That Matter*.[5] It was said to me many times by teachers and authority figures, that I create trouble for myself when I deliberately try to be different. But I wasn't trying to be different; rather I was simply searching for pathways to being more like myself by way of imitations of other people. In that sense I was searching for sameness. Putting my look together in the bathroom before school, I would begin the process of constructing 'me.' In that private space, identity is a sensitive material not yet fully formed or subjectivated[6] into social existence. Expecting to be celebrated as Marilyn was, I found myself reprimanded for not being in uniform. Moreover, the display of my subjectivity was seen as nuisance behaviour, an incitement, and a transgression in fact. Yet no nine-year-old child understands what it is to incite or transgress, therefore I saw my teachers admonitions the same way I saw bullying in the playground, as a game, as a kind of parade or performance that I revelled in. When I was told boys don't wear eyeliner, I answered, "I do." Butler writes in *Gender is Burning: Questions of Appropriation and Subversion*[7] that according to Louis Althusser's notion of interpellation,[8] the call of authority (which in my example is made by the authority of the teacher) is formative of the subject (which is me, the nine year old boy who wore eyeliner to school). The teachers command describes the utterance of power, the ritualised repetitions by which gender norms are produced, compelling me to conform. Yet my retort rearticulated the expectation of uniformity according to my own sense of logic. Butler suggests,

> *It is this constitutive failure of the performative, this slippage between discursive command and its appropriated effect, which provides the linguistic occasion and index for a consequential disobedience.*[9]

Butler illustrates her concepts through a consideration of the film *Paris Is Burning*,[10] a documentary depicting Harlem Drag Ball culture, which grew out of New York City in the 1980s. It was a dynamic performance space and a social scene where identity was communicated and exchanged by performing the shifts between self and other. The scene produced 'House' music and a highly stylised set of movements referred to as *Voguing*. The practice of *Voguing* was invented specifically to mimic the tropes of Vogue magazine. It was all about artifice, finding a sense of inclusion in glamour culture, aligning identity with particular values. Contestants in the Balls would compete against each other by walking the runway in categories such as 'Legend,' which involved the imitation of an historical figure such as Josephine Baker, or 'Attitude,' in which the performer would enact a particular demeanour such as 'Fierce Queen.' They were judged on makeup, costuming, dance/performance abilities and of course 'hotness,' but most importantly authenticity and 'realness.' In this particular mode of performance, imitation of the 'other' becomes an authentic means of expressing the 'self,' and you were judged on how well you pull it off. The ethos is one of collage compositions, cutting up, mixing and re-constructing with a consciousness for self-reinvention and perfectly shaped transformations. Imitating Josephine Baker on the runway at the Ball meant that you would assume her identity, her gender, her sexuality and her history, as well as her constructed identity, her pathos, her defiance, her vulnerability, re-fashioned to be overlayed upon your own.

The audience is active in their responses, calling out and vocalising the experience, often imitating the walker and exaggerating imperfections. It was a particularly nuanced and stylised form of heckling that the punters called 'reading.' It was the art of performing a critique for the purpose of shifting the attention. As the subject performs and negotiates transformations from self into other and back, anonymous voices from the crowd call camp and witty observations, such as,

> *Baby your body is 'LEGENDAIRY!' All legs and dairy (pointing to a potbelly poking out of a sequined ball gown.*[11]*)*

If you are witty enough, you could potentially steal the show and win the competition. Your identity becomes known to the crowd. *You go girl! Work that body!* There was no clear distinction between the performer and the viewer, as the audience participates equally in the spectacle. If the audience approve, they say so. Mikhail Bakhtin describes the medieval carnivals of Europe similarly, in that the distinction between the actor and spectator is fluid. Bakhtin writes,

> *Carnival is not a spectacle to be seen by the people, they live in it, and everybody participates…*[12]

For Bakhtin, the notion of identity is explored through the historical phenomenon of the 'carnivalesque.' Bakhtin saw the great carnivals of Medieval Europe as occasions in which the political, legal and ideological authority of the church was temporarily inverted, and personal liberation was permitted in a space of licenced transgression. The carnival allowed the individual a political agency, in that it provided an official space where the assumptions of the dominant power structures of feudality were subverted through humour and chaos. Originating out of clerical festivities such as the *Festival of the Circumcision*[13] in which the junior deacons of the church were encouraged to perform official ceremonies in a satirical, burlesque manner, the carnival grew to involve all people. The community would participate equally in a collective paradigm of creative and theatrical expression. The true self may be revealed in the form of ritualised caricature and farce, affecting the sacred and the profane without consequence. Bakhtin suggests that modern social spectacles such as Mardi Gras operate differently to the carnival. He argues that as capitalism developed, the carnivalesque dwindled into literary trope, yet I assert that platforms such as the *Harlem Drag Ball* and the *Blitz Club* embodied the spirit of the carnivalesque unquestionably, as does the advent of reality TV and the permitted vulgarity of festivals such as *Trough, Spring Break* and *Girls Gone Wild*. My contention is that participation in the spectacle can be achieved remotely from any vantage point or location, just as I involved myself in Marilyn's performance on Australian TV.

Body Talk[14] is a video artwork that seeks to evoke a sense of the carnivalesque. Projected a gallery in Melbourne in 2014, the video depicts the interactions of three individual 'movers' (performers) in a dance video sequence. Variety performer Jamie Kendall and I articulated our bodies in relation to each others movements on a rooftop deck in the city. If I moved my pelvis toward him, for example, his pelvis moved back, and to balance himself, his chest automatically moves toward me. A bodily conversation is initiated, much like the mirrored gestures between the figure on the train and myself. Exploring the temporal and spatial relationship between the two moving figures informed the method for Jamie and I to evoke a sense of the physiology of our mutual sensitivities in intimate proximity. The pull/push effect also embodied the tension of desire and ambivalence between two individual subjects, creating a metaphor that set our bodies in motion.

The scene is set an enmeshed deck with a lace-like steel structure made up of circles in a grid, beyond this grid is the city skyline. Encased within this rigid and formal structure, we perform to each other and to the camera; the footage is captured on a Bolex H-16mm film camera by a third 'mover,' Hanna Chetwin, and converted to digital video. My aim in juxtaposing the architecture with the organic forms of the performers and their improvised movements was to delineate a space in which Jamie and I could enact the organic flows of subjectivity. We dressed in garish and revealing costumes that made deliberate reference to camp and pop history. The clown motif gestures toward David Bowie's Pierrot-esque costume in the film clip to *Ashes to Ashes* (1980,) while I modelled Jamie's costume on Michael Alig, a media personality and ex-member the *Club Kids*. The *Club Kids* were a group of delinquent activists who occupied the formerly austere dance halls and clubs after the stock market crash and the AIDS epidemic shifted the social order of New York City nightlife. Being self consciously aware of the overlaps between pop and performance art, they would construct attention grabbing costumes and thrift store ensembles that made reference to everything from the circus and sci-fi horror to haute couture and old Hollywood. Their costumes and theatricality, accompanied by their outrageously boorish behaviours demanded a sense of inclusion in culture and history, and they usurped this status with an attitude of defiance, remixing culture according to an excess of its original referent.

Being the third mover, filmmaker Hanna Chetwin's role in *Body Talk* was to document the scene between Jamie and I, and to involve herself in the spectacle that we were creating with our bodies—to be the watcher. The camera and its operator act as a stand in for the remotely located viewer, who watches the scene via a projection in the art gallery. An intimacy between Jamie and I is intruded upon by the camera's gaze, as though there is a bigger scene taking place somewhere off camera, that Jamie and I have escaped to discover each others company privately. Perhaps we met at the *Blitz Club* in 1980, finding ourselves caught in a moment, an eternal loop, mediated by the hypnotic spell of desire, mimesis and celluloid. Our interactions are manifest in reflected light like a memory of playful love and halcyon adventure. The use of 16mm camera technology shifts time, giving the viewer a sense of nostalgia. For me, the visual quality of 16mm film transports me to the 1970s and perhaps the early 80s; a period just before VHS videocassette tape camcorders became widely accessible. The flapping shutter of the Bolex H 16mm accompanied by the relentless repetition of the film spool act like an overly articulated clock, measuring a moment suspended outside of time.[15] The use of film also makes reference to the work of feminist artists such as

Valie Export, Hannah Wilke and Carolee Schneemann, as well as queer artist Jack Smith. Flamboyantly enacting himself in the true spirit of the carnivalesque, Smith sought to construct a performed identity that subverted the traditional male role by inviting the viewer's voyeurism, and offering himself as the object of desire. It wasn't everybody's response, but during the course of the exhibition, I noticed some viewers imitating the pathos and pelvic articulations from the projection screen, just as I had done, as a nine-year-old boy imitating Marilyn.

Marilyn said *Why compare yourself to other people? Nobody can do a better job of being you, than you.*[16] The irony is, growing up and learning about my individuality meant I was always comparing myself to other people. This brings us back to the initial question of identity.

[1] Identity—definition, Oxford Online Dictionary, viewed 2nd February 2016.
http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/identity

[2] Max van Manen *Phenomenology of Practice.* (Walnut Creek USA: Left Coast Press, 2014).

[3] Van Manen *Phenomenology,* 12.

[4] Judith Butler *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York USA: Routledge, 1990).

[5] Judith Butler *Bodies That Matter* (New York USA: Routledge, 1993).

[6] Although not recognised by the Oxford English dictionary, Butler uses the word "subjectivated" on page 81 of *Bodies That Matter*, referring to Louis Althusser's notion of interpellation, and the manner in which a subject is not yet formed until he has been identified.

7 Judith Butler Bodies That Matter (New York USA: Routledge, 1993), 81

8 Louis Althusser *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses.* (Paris: La Pensée, 1997), 170-77

9 Judith Butler Bodies That Matter (New York USA: Routledge, 1993), 82

10 Paris Is Burning, directed by Jennie Livingston (United States: Miramax Films, 1991).

11 Ju Ju bee, a contestant on RuPaul's Drag Race, made this statement while competing in a segment named *"Reading is Fundamental,"* Season 2 episode 2 (Hollywood: Television broadcast February 2nd- April 26th, 2010)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wjZ2VBKJqrI

12 Mikhail Bakhtin Rabelais and His World. Trans. by Helene Iswolsky. (Bloomington USA: Indiana University Press, 1984).

13 Carnivalesque, Wikipedia, last modified December 2012
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carnivalesque

14 Body Talk 2014, by Nick Chilvers. 16mm film converted to digital video, duration 10mins. Exhibited at Project Space, 94, 23–27 Cardigan St, Carlton VIC Australia 3053. Body Talk was included in the 2014 colander of events for the Melbourne Fringe Festival.
https://vimeo.com/124489295

15 Paul Sietsema *Seven Films by Paul Sietsema* (Milan, Italy: Mousse Publishing Denver: MCA Denver, ©2014.)
The term "overly articulated clock," is borrowed from Michael Ned Holte's essay *Overly Articulated Clocks*, included in this publication. Sietsema is also quoted…*The projects became a little like overly articulated clocks, meting out the time outside of time*, which I have loosely paraphrased.

[16] Marilyn Peter Robinson, Facebook comment, UK November 2014.