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Identity and the Politics of Difference
Australian and Chinese reflections
Shane Hulbert
Issues of identity are well represented in contemporary art and photography. Artists have been interested in the politics of difference as a discourse to explore themes, in particular those that define and challenge stereotypes, such as gender, race and religion.

Ideas around cultural difference, politics and philosophy have been ways for artists to enquire into issues of identity, including works that are narrative-driven, documentary-based or constructive. Self-portraiture, humour and digital re-photographing techniques are popular ways for artists to investigate these themes.

Embedded within ideas of identity are notions of community and belonging. As a way of being connected, community and identity reflect on the significance of territories and boundaries, and the type of bonds that are established between people, either through interests, common goals, diversity and/or cultural difference. As an area of common life, ideas of community have moved away from being restricted to geographic areas, and have shifted more towards a network-mediated space evidenced by such recent phenomena as social media, smart phone mobile networking and geo-fencing.

The loaded politics of identity meant that this theme, more so than landscape, was significantly more divided in terms of how the artists responded. For the Australian artists, politics was central to their work, whether through reflections on history, gender, feminism or memory, while for the Chinese artists, the interest centred on understanding the role and place of the individual in a rapidly expanding China.
Lumens archive #89
Suzhou, China
Lumens Festival Project Archive
Photo: Shane Hulbert
The positioning of the artist in these works is from both the perspective of the insider and the outsider. Some of the works are reflective, mirrors into a way of being that explore personal histories (whether of the artists or the subjects), and some are observational, loaded with meanings and attempts to portray ‘truth’. Whatever the positioning, this overall difference became central to the success of the project. Community is a reflection of the individual, their self-assigned or guided role in the collective future of the group: how they belong and what they do.
Martine Corompt
Australian, b.1963, UK

Martine Corompt works with mixed media installation to explore her specific interest in researching various aspects of animation, such as anthropomorphism, caricature and the animate space. Recent exhibitions include *Tideline* at West Space Gallery Melbourne, and *Swarm* at Schoolhouse Studios for the Melbourne Festival 2012. Currently undertaking her PhD titled *Forced Perspectives* at Melbourne University, Corompt teaches in the Expanded Studio Practice studio in the School of Art at RMIT University. *Cesspool* was originally part of the collaborative project *ATTRIUM*, a group exhibition between art academics at RMIT University, Australia and Auckland University of Technology, New Zealand.

Drawing on the pseudoscience texts of Italian criminologist and physician Cesare Lombroso (1835−1909), *Cesspool*, explores the idea that a malleable physiognomy underpins all identities, ultimately revealing Lombroso’s criminal in each of us. Initially appearing quite playful, Cesspool descends into a menacing concoction of distorted caricatures continually attempting to ‘escape’ the cesspool they create. Utilising the anatomically identifiable criminal characterises of Lombroso’s studies, the sloping forehead, prognathism, unusually sized ears, as well as asymmetry of the face and cranium, Corompt makes conceptual links to the convict history of Australia and the nation’s criminal past.
Cesspool 2008
Still image from single channel video animation, black and white
1 min:50 sec
Courtesy of the artist
Ian Haig works at the intersection of visual and media arts. His work explores the strangeness of everyday reality and focuses on themes of the human body, devolution, abjection, transformation and psychopathology, often through the ‘lens’ of low cultural forms. His work has been exhibited in galleries and video / media festivals around the world, including; The Museum of Modern Art (MOMA), New York, US; Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, France; Artec Biennale, Nagoya, Japan; Art Museum of China, Beijing, China; The Torrance Art Museum, Los Angeles, US; and nationally in Australia, including The Australian Centre for Contemporary Art (ACCA), Melbourne; The Australian Centre for the Moving Image (ACMI), Melbourne; Gallery of Modern Art (GOMA), Brisbane; The Experimental Art Foundation, Adelaide; and The Ian Potter Museum of Art, Melbourne. In 2003 he received a fellowship from the New Media Arts Board of the Australia Council. He currently teaches in the Expanded Studio Practice studio in the School of Art at RMIT University.

In How to Make a Monster, Haig gives credence to both the boyish fascination with deformity, and the human fascination with the disgusting and the gross. The video, simply composed of his head in full frame, peeling skin off his face, is an allegory of disease, sickness, cleansing, detoxing, and the inner and outer body.
How to Make a Monster 2005
Still image from SD video
colour, 2 min:50 sec
Courtesy of the artist
Hua Qian works with video to reveal aspects of heritage and culture under threat from China’s rapid transition into economic growth and urbanisation. His motive is both personal and political: he was born in the old city district of Suzhou, which he sees as being under threat from commercial housing developments. Hua has an MFA in Fine Art from the University of Texas, Dallas, US, and is currently a lecturer in Digital Art at the Suzhou Art, Design & Technology Institute.

*In-and-Outer* presents a methodical fly-by and walk-through of the ancient heritage site in Suzhou. Beginning with an aerial 3D model of the city, the work moves quickly into live footage of the canals and lane ways of the city. There are thousands of alleys scattered throughout the district, representing hundreds of ways to move through the city, yet the claustrophobic and progressive tightening of the space over time acts as a symbol of the pressure on the locals to relocate to the suburbs. Over time each of the locals has entered the city in various ways, yet despite the multitude of actual exits from the city, the resident’s only way out is through relocation.
In-and-Outer 2012
Still image from HD video, colour
4 min:25 sec
Courtesy of the artist
The perception of memory, the small details to the more general ‘feel’ of an almost lost memory and the capacity for memory to be ‘collective’ form the basis for Kózka’s photographic work. His re-staged images, carefully constructed in studio spaces, become a home to the cast and models playing out his directed moments. These scenarios tap into the psyche of own personal stories; the awkward dinner with family, the fumbling teenagers on the backseat of the car, through to the more culturally common memories of eating out in Chinese restaurants or living in suburbia. Kózka has exhibited widely in Australia and internationally, including the National Portrait Gallery in both Australia and the UK; the Pingyao International Photo Festival, China; and Hanmi Museum of Photography in South Korea. He was awarded the Hasselblad Masters award in 2008 and his work was recently included in Hijacked: Australian and German Photography. He is currently a photography lecturer in the Print Imaging Practice studio in the School of Art at RMIT University.

*Kew House Dinner Time* is a representation, one person’s perspective of a remembered moment, but it also asks the viewers to re-connect with their own memories, to share the commonalities and to use the image as a springboard into their own history. Through the use of such generic events as the family dinner, this image presents a tension and disassociation that is common in families with teenage children. These moments, often played out during periods of forced intimacy, reveal the collective experience that has become a key theme in Kózka’s work.
Kew house dinner time 2008
Archival pigment print 89 x 116cm
Courtesy of the artist and MARS Gallery, Melbourne
Li Xiao Song combines photography with mixed media, video and installation to explore a range of issues facing a modernising China. His work has been shown in various national and international galleries including the Beijing Art Museum, China; Shenzhen Contemporary Art Terminal, China; Macao Museum of Art, China; Shanghai Zendai Museum of Modern Art, China; and the National Gallery, Prague, Czech Republic. He is currently a lecturer in the Digital Art Department at the Suzhou Art, Design & Technology Institute.

In traditional Chinese culture, stone lions are believed to fend off evil spirits and bring good fortune to the occupants of the house. They bear the moral message of power and pride, often guarding the gates of ancient mansions and temples. The lions also bear witness to the generational passing of time, a result of the long lasting properties of stone. In Hello, the lions appear as majestic guardians, in contrast to the secluded ambience of the gates beyond.
Hello 2005
Silver gelatin photography, water colour paint
20 x 40cm
Courtesy of the artist
Nikos Pantazopoulos' multidisciplinary practice involves photography, video, sculpture and event organisation. His work ranges from formal photographic prints to participatory events, including *A Monument to Toilets, an exhibition and procession* in London, England, where the audience collectively removed the objects from the gallery and reconstructed them in another public location. Pantazopoulos has an MFA from Goldsmiths University, London, and is currently completing a PhD, titled *How to Make a Monument* at Monash University, Melbourne, Australia. He is currently a photography lecturer in the Print Imaging Practice studio in the School of Art at RMIT University.

In 2011 Pantazopoulos began *Untitled (Darkrooms)*, an architectural photography and sculpture project in which he began to research, document and rebuild queer sites that have either been demolished or denied heritage listing. *Untitled (Man on Horse)* is part of a sequence of medium format photographs taken in men-only venues in the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community in Australia. Positioned as a monument to queer history in Australia, the image presents the iconic cowboy, familiar as the all American, rugged Marlboro Man, leisurely riding his horse through the rear of the club. The space is inherently a social one, referencing moderism’s idea of the utopian social space used for dialogue, communication, celebration, spectacle and exchange. Yet the absence of the human form presents a timelessness, and formalises the historical, architectural and sculptural aesthetics of the sites as valuable places in Australia’s cultural heritage.
Untitled (Man on horse) from the series
Untitled (Darkrooms) 2010
Archival pigment print 120 x 120cm
Courtesy of the artist
Craig Shell works exclusively with photography to explore the relationships between site and memory, specifically as they relate to trauma. Collective trauma is evident in sites of mass murder, genocide and major accidents with multiple deaths. Shell has a long history as a commercial, studio photographer, working in advertising and editorial photography. Gaining a deep understanding of the linguistic power of the photographic image from his commercial work, he has recently applied this formula to more expansive and experimental documentary photography. Shell has an MFA from RMIT University, and is currently the coordinator of digital programs at the Photography Studies College in Melbourne, Australia.

*Tuol Sleng #1*, from the series *Trauma Imagery: Documenting images from hell* depicts the residual site trauma of the torture rooms at S:21 in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, the former school used as an interrogation and torture facility by the Khmer Rouge during the Kampuchean war and subsequent genocide. Shell is not attempting to force remembrance or even sympathy, but rather to define the psychology of a location: we may not have any historical connection to the tragic events of the Cambodian past, but that does not stop us from recognising a bad place when we see one.
Tuol Sleng #1
from the series *Trauma Imagery: Documenting images from Hell* 2008
Archival pigment print 60 x 90cm
Courtesy of the artist
Darren Sylvester
Australian, b.1974

Darren Sylvester’s multidisciplinary practice involves photography, sculpture, video, music and performance. Usually involving a wide range of pop culture elements and narratives, mediums are given high-end production sheens or twists to be transformed into discussions on contemporary ennui, pathos and mortality that is direct, yet inherent, with levels of complexity. Sylvester’s work has been widely exhibited throughout Australia and internationally, with work held in public collections including the National Gallery of Australia; the National Gallery of Victoria; Queensland Art Gallery; the Art Gallery of New South Wales; and the Art Gallery of Western Australia. He currently lectures in the Print Imaging Practice studio at RMIT University, Melbourne and the Victorian College of the Arts, Melbourne.

*What Happens will Happen* is from a series of photographs fabricated from real face-painted teenage protestors wearing political-type slogans. The work examines a skewed idea of both wanting to be involved politically yet at the same time self-consciously desiring to be cool, perhaps either to impress friends or integrate this attitude into the day’s activities. The title alludes to the decisions that will influence these young subjects’ lives: what happens will happen, made without their input. It also projects the idealism of youth, by being seen, by protesting, by making a mask that reflects your stance, you can hope to create change in the world.
What happens will happen 2010
Lightjet print 160 X 120cm
Courtesy of the artist and Sullivan+Strumpf Gallery, Sydney
Lyndal Walker is an artist, curator and writer. She has exhibited in Australia and internationally, including The Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA), Sydney; The Centre for Contemporary Photography (CCP), Melbourne; The Potter Museum, Melbourne; Modern Culture, New York: and La Panaderia, Mexico City, Mexico. Her work has been published and written about in numerous publications including *Frieze, Art & Text, Photofile* and *Beaux Arts Magazine*. Walker has a Masters in Fine Art from Monash University.

The series *La Toilette D’une Femme* is inspired by historical painting of women in various states of dressing. While the women who appeared in the paintings were mainly anonymous objects of male desire, her portraits depict women for whom getting dressed is an important ritual, a creative process and ultimately a statement of their identity. Rather than validate the expectations of the fashion industry or the prevalence of raunch culture, the individualised, personal styles of the women in the images seek instead to promote female expression by women who enjoy using clothing to help define how they see themselves.

The appearance of the photographer is also an acknowledgement that the image reflects the desires of the photographer, and that in creating our self-image, we are aware of the images that surround us in advertising.
Reflection of Celeste Mcleod and Me
from the series La Toilette D’une Femme 2010
Lightjet print 120 x 160cm
Courtesy of the artist
Wang Gang’s work is focused primarily on the social and cultural connections that Chinese people have with place. Drawing on the context of the famous Chinese saying ‘Just as there is paradise in heaven, there are Suzhou and Hangzhou on earth’, Wang’s photographic images explore myths of place. Gang’s work was recently exhibited in the Pingyao International Photography Festival, China. He currently works as a lecturer in the Visual Communication Department at the Suzhou Art, Design & Technology Institute.

Community reflects on the popular pastime of elderly people staying engaged with each other, utilising public space through culturally supported activities, such as dance, music and tai chi.
Community 2012
Digital photographic image (projected)
Courtesy of the artist
Yang Haitao works with photography and video to highlight the impact of a changing China on its ageing and elderly population. He has a BA (Film & Animation) from the Zhejiang Science and Technology University, and is currently a lecturer in the Visual Communication Department at the Suzhou Art, Design & Technology Institute.

There is an attempt to comment on the lingering of the ‘old ways’ for the people in his images, people maintaining their connections to their communist upbringing: stay physically and mentally healthy, reduce your burden on the State. The park-goers may all have a different story to tell, but their park activities reflect on repetitive monotony: every day, they dance, they sing, they laugh, day after day.
Grand Park 2012
Digital photographic image (projected)
Courtesy of the artist
Using water as a primary symbol to reflect on the Chinese cultural and spiritual connections with place, Zhou Wei’s photographic work addresses his concerns over an observed increase in the disconnection of heritage in modern cities. Wei’s work has been exhibited in China, at the 2012 Pingyao International Photography Festival; and in 2011 at the Lishui International Photography Exhibition. He has an MFA from Suzhou University and currently works as a lecturer in the Visual Communication Department at the Suzhou Art, Design & Technology Institute.

*Water Reflection of Ping Jiang* uses the motif of reflection to present the dislocation and fragmentation of the declining value of heritage in Chinese cities. Using the same canal system in Suzhou onto which the image was projected for the festival, Zhou’s image not only mirrors a real time engagement with the event, but also highlights the ability of photography to translate meaning through representation.
Water reflection of Ping Jiang 2012
Digital photographic image (projected)
Courtesy of the artist