

## Performance in Contemporary Art



Zhang Peili and Geng Jianyi, *Wrapping Up – King and Queen*, Beijing, November 1986

texts, as well as some traditional Chinese texts. This period has been called “Reading Fever”. [...] I would say there were three solid legs (a trinity) of thought I felt an affinity to at the time: Wittgenstein, Duchamp and Zen Buddhism.<sup>36</sup> Attention to the individual body in isolation – to a notion of the ‘I’ that could be distinguished from such variations on the ‘We’ – came subsequently when ideas of individual expression began to circulate. Concepts from psychoanalysis and expressionism in art were beginning to be encountered in China in the early 1980s. In February 1981, the Chinese art journal *Meishu* published an article about the concept of self-expression and existentialism in relation to Jean-Paul Sartre, for example. It is also significant that an exhibition titled *250 Years of French Painting* was held in the autumn of 1982 at China Art Gallery. The artist Song Dong has said that this ‘exhibition presented for the first time an opportunity to see human figures painted with expression and engaged in movement and action’.<sup>37</sup>

Chinese artists in this early period had not been concerned with personal expression in the same way as Western artists immersed in psychoanalytic theory, nor was their conception of the body premised upon a Western mind/body dualism. Instead, in Chinese culture the body is a process and an embodied exchange between physical body and spirit (*shenti*), bringing our corporeal

existence into contact with the entire universe. In his book *Performance Art in China*, Thomas Berghuis observes that the Chinese conception of the ‘lived body’ – body/life or body/substance – connects and equalises the notions of *//We/It*.<sup>38</sup> Berghuis makes the important observation that, distinct from Western ideas of existentialism, psychoanalysis or phenomenology, in the Chinese intellectual context of this period ‘the internal function of the body and its external behaviour in society are dependent upon each other, as can be seen, for example, in the Taoist notion that the internal system of the body represents a landscape’.<sup>39</sup> This is a philosophy that is highly relevant to contemporary artists’ fascination with bodily practice as a counterpoint to language-driven conceptualism.

It was not until 1985 that Wang Qiang staged what Berghuis says ‘can be considered one of the first private performance works’ in China: ‘he posed as a living statue, wearing a suit and covered entirely in paint and plaster, with his head wrapped in a white cloth’.<sup>40</sup> One year before, in 1984, Wang Peng had staged a performance ‘action’ work (*xingdong yishu*), titled *84 Performance*, for which he covered his body in Chinese ink and made imprints on sheets of *xuan* paper. Subsequently, the artists Zhang Peili and Geng Jianyi staged *Wrapping Up – King and Queen* 1986 in a private setting in Luoyang, wrapping their bodies, very tightly, in newspaper and rope. Zhang and Geng’s work represented a new, expressive kind of self-suffocation with psychoanalytic connotations, rather than seeking to make ‘an impact on the overall conditions of society’.<sup>41</sup> Artist Ma Liuming, who staged solo performances and participated in the performance titled *Suicide Project* by Wei Guanqing in 1988, involving wrapping of the body, states how he became influenced by the ‘wrapping’ installations of French artist duo Christo and Jeanne-Claude, whose work he encountered through documentation.<sup>42</sup> This was before a significant revival of body art by Ma Liuming, Zhang Huan, Zhu Ming – artists of the Beijing East Village – and others in the 1990s that could be compared in spirit to Vienna Actionism, often taking extreme and challenging forms, and producing work involving the naked body that posed the artist more clearly as an expressive agent shaping his or her own sense of self, rather than as a manipulator of materials.

## Inhabiting the image

The body art practices discussed in the previous section emerged, broadly speaking, from the exploration of existential questions. But artists during this period also considered the place of the physical body in the natural ecosystem, and its potentially spiritual dimensions. Overall these works stage the possibility of a kind of transparency of the body: a continuity between inner and outer self, encapsulated in the idea that one’s physical expression – one’s skin, naked body, tolerance of pain – could serve as an index of interiority, or could point to this as a fantasy, sometimes critically. But a parallel strand of work on the body developed explicitly, despite having traceable roots in earlier periods, through the 1970s and into the 1980s. Within the emergent context of postmodernism, performances by artists such as Sanja Iveković, Luigi Ontani or Cindy Sherman suggested that the gendered self was not biologically innate or authentic, but was something that could be created through the enactment of fantasy or desire. One of the primary ways in which postmodernism deconstructed the fantasy of apparently authentic existence was via forms of ‘passing’ or ‘drag’, an approach that has been elaborated further and more fluidly still by the subsequent generation.



Jack Smith, *Flaming Creatures* (film still), 1962-3

The presumptive opposition of body art and image is crude, however, and key figures such as American experimental filmmaker Jack Smith productively muddle it. The greasypaint-caked faces and figures set within Smith's downtown New York apartment might be seen as one of the first instances of a form of drag performance camouflaging itself within a kind of 'total painting' situation, which also dealt with the body as abject matter. In his short story 'The Memoirs of Maria Montez' (1963-4), itself also a form of narrative drag, appropriating popular style, Smith describes the B-movie star who inspired much of his work in painterly terms that resonate with the space he was living in and his provisionally constructed stage sets: 'Maria Montez was propped up beside the pool which reflected her ravishing beauty. A chunk fell off her face, showing the grey under her rouge.'<sup>43</sup> Smith's vividly material description of the construction of identity and glamour relates directly to the paint-pasted faces of the characters appearing in his photographs and home-made films from the early 1960s, such as *Flaming Creatures* 1963 and *Normal Love* 1963, as well as the set itself: his ramshackle apartment, decorated with exotic elements of Eastern architecture and painted scenes presenting, in his mind, an alternative to the pristine 'eggshell walls of MoMA'.<sup>44</sup>

Through the 1970s, we see a shift from the early, queer self-transformations of Smith and his (proto-Warholian) co-stars, with their painterly low-fi glamour, and his influence on artists including Joan Jonas, who attended his performances, towards the concerns of those artists such as Sherman and Ontani, who were ever more engaged within an accelerating media culture of lens-derived images. In this period, artists responded to the proliferation of television, magazines and the increased availability of hand-held image-capture technologies like video (notably, the Super-8 or Portapak camera), shifting the early focus on forms of masquerade (masks or camouflage) towards an entangled relationship with photographic images and their surface. Inhabiting the image was becoming, from the 1970s towards the 1980s, not a possibility but an apparent necessity. The question of how one appeared, as much as what one depicted, came to be a foundation for art practice in the decades building up to our highly performative attention economy in the early twenty-first century. Andy Warhol was an artist

Luigi Ontani, *San Sebastiano Indiano* 1976, photograph hand-painted by the artist





Cindy Sherman, *Untitled*,  
from the series *Bus Riders*  
1976–2000

Sanja Ivekovic, *Make-Up –  
Make-Down*, video still, 1978



who anticipated this state of affairs, from early in the 1960s, through his cultivation of a deadpan camp persona in a blond shock wig, his castings of an entourage of ‘superstars’ in his films, and his embrace of with celebrity glamour in his paintings, all set within the theatre of his Factory and relishing ‘documentation’ by the paparazzi.

Two important exhibitions staged key questions about drag and identity-play during this period, presenting early conceptualisations of how a picture might represent a performance: *Transformer: Aspects of Travesty* (1974), curated by Jean-Christophe Ammann at Kunstmuseum Lucerne, and *Pictures* (1977), curated by Douglas Crimp at Artists Space in New York.<sup>45</sup> These shows investigated how image-making for artists had become entangled with the circulation of media images, which insistently reiterated ideals of beauty and gender norms, and how artists might appropriate or even colonise advertising imagery. This move was part of a wider shift in pop culture, encapsulated by the multiple personae inhabited by David Bowie in his transition from rock and roll to glam rock. Bowie had stunned critics by abandoning his superstar creation Ziggy Stardust at the height of his fame, in 1973, and re-inventing himself from there. The star summed up something of this shape-shifting attitude, saying of his own strategy, ‘I felt more like an actor on stage than a rock ‘n’ roll star. I was not *in* rock and roll, I was using it.’<sup>46</sup>

Work by women artists of the period, such as Eleanor Antin, Sanja Iveković, Lorraine O’Grady, Joan Jonas, Cindy Sherman and Adrian Piper marked a series of important transitions, from the Actionists’ use of the female body as a signifier of beauty towards the reclamation and transformation of the female body by the artist herself. These artists bluntly rejected stereotypical notions of femininity, both via parody and by asserting the possibilities of new identities. In the video *Representational Painting* 1971, Antin appears applying make-up in front of the camera, as though it were paint. Likewise, in *Make-Up – Make-Down* 1978, Iveković films her torso while she handles lipstick, face powder and mascara in a fetishistic manner that suggests the ritual of making oneself up as a seductive process in itself, commenting critically on the construction of identity and femininity as it is peddled in women’s magazines. In *Double Life* 1975–6, the artist sourced snapshots from her own life and juxtaposed them with glossy advertisements for perfume or underwear to create a series of poignant and parodic diptychs that register the gap between reality and idealisation. By contrast, Jonas drew upon woman’s status as image to play out fiction more explicitly. In 1972, after a trip to Japan where she was influenced both by new video-camera technology and Noh and Kabuki theatre, she invented an alter ego called Organic Honey, what Jonas has described as a masked ‘erotic seductress’, who wore a doll-like mask, a headdress and different costumes, representing a mechanised ideal female figure.<sup>47</sup> In the performance *Organic Honey’s Visual Telepathy* 1972, Jonas was filmed and the image relayed on video, effecting an onstage split between live and mediated reality, which doubled the existing split between her own real presence and her masquerading character image. Jonas’s live work marked a significant step away from body art towards a postmodern staging of presence entangled with image technology.

Cindy Sherman, an important artist featured in Crimp’s *Pictures* article of 1979, also turned to make-up and costume to create a cast of characters from her own face and body. Where the artist herself was – her *I* – is hard to locate. Her work offers the self as a series of deferrals, in line with Simone de



Joan Jonas, *Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy* 1972



Adrian Piper, *The Mythic Being* 1973, video, 8 min; excerpted segment from the film *Other Than Art's Sake* by the artist Peter Kennedy (detail: video still at 00:06:02)

Beauvoir's assertion that one is not born but becomes a woman – or becomes many women, in Sherman's case.<sup>48</sup> Her personae – whether in her *Untitled Film Stills* from the late 1970s, her parodies of fashion photographs of the 1980s, or the history portraits and clowns from the 1990s – range from feminine ideals to exaggerated archetypes, and shift between naturalism, abstracted grotesquerie and glamour. Swiss artist Urs Lüthi and Italian artist Luigi Ontani – both key artists in the *Transformer* exhibition – similarly made live performance and photography to create experimental forms of drag, posing queer constructions of identity in ambiguously gendered terms. Ontani, for example, identifies himself with the authority of art history by inserting his image into the frame of old master paintings, whether as Saint Sebastian or Leda and the Swan, after Titian or Michelangelo.

The work of these artists is emblematic of emergent articulations of both feminist and queer politics in this period, a deconstructive and critical approach to received gender norms and ideas of 'straightness' which have subsequently been theorised by writers including Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Judith Butler. The implications of this notion of / move on from existentialism in a significant way. Here the self is not to be discovered, or probed at by going deep into one's psyche, but is constructed and projected towards the world, shaped in relation to social norms and expectations, whether with or against. This new performative attitude represents a fundamental shift not only in the psychology of the artist, but also

in the relationship between artist and artwork. It opens up the possibility of a new continuum between the self and the surface of the work, where the apparently superficial might be more truthful than what lies beneath. 'If you want to know about me, look at the surface of my pictures', Warhol famously said.

During this period, artists investigated ideas of self not only in relation to gender norms, and social constructions of beauty, but also in terms of race and class. In the 1970s, the American artist Adrian Piper began a series of performance interventions in public space titled *Catalysis*. The work included painting her clothes with wet white paint, stuffing a huge white towel into her mouth or covering herself in a mixture of vinegar, eggs, milk and cod liver oil before travelling on the New York subway and elsewhere in the street. The *Catalysis* performances were intended to perform social disruption: her actions represented 'catalysts' that challenged social norms in terms of etiquette, dress codes and the normative boundary between what is considered to be appropriate behaviour for public or private spheres, or between sanity and insanity.

From 1972, Piper created an alter ego in which she 'dressed in drag as a young, black male' whom she titled the 'Mythic Being', for a series of performances begun in 1973 and continuing until 1975.<sup>49</sup> Her costume comprised an afro wig, moustache and sunglasses, with a t-shirt and jeans, and the artist adopted forms of behaviour that were apparently 'masculine', with an aggressive edge, conjuring up the figure of a lower-class black male; a figure she knew many white people perceived as an especially dangerous threat. As the character, Piper says that she 'crashed various contexts in New York cultural life [...] I went to the movies [...] I crashed art world openings [...] I went to the Opera; I did all the sorts of things I normally did except with this masculine guise.'<sup>50</sup> Piper's 'Mythic Being' first appeared in a series of seventeen photo-advertisements in *The Village Voice*. Photographed as the 'Being' at home, Piper pasted thought bubbles containing words from her own diaries onto her portrait images. The the status of her photographs as 'documentation' of her actions was provocatively undercut by the addition of these autobiographical journal entries. The combination of public revelation and private contemplation was an exorcism of sorts, the artist has explained. 'The experience of the Mythic Being thus becomes part of the public history and is no longer a part of my own.'<sup>51</sup>

In the 1980s, the American artist Lorraine O'Grady created the character Mlle Bourgeoise Noire – a critical answer to Antin's 1970s 'first black ballerina' character, in the performance of Eleanora Antinova. Mlle Bourgeoise Noire was a beauty queen persona appearing at art openings in a ballgown made of 180 pairs of white gloves. She moved around, when she appeared at openings, continuously hitting herself with a white cat-o'-nine-tails, while shouting out poems protesting against the racially segregated art world of that time. O'Grady's work in photography, performance and film has, since then, dealt with the subjects of diaspora, hybridity and black female subjectivity, often using her own position to bring into visibility wider social issues. In *Art Is ...* 1983, O'Grady created her own float for the annual African American Day Parade in Harlem. With fifteen collaborators dressed in white, O'Grady's float paraded down the main boulevard, displaying an enormous, ornate, gilded frame, reminiscent of the frames used for old master paintings (pp.14–15). The words 'Art Is ...' were emblazoned across the bottom of the float. At various points along the route, O'Grady and her collaborators jumped off the float and held up the empty picture frames, inviting people to pose in them. Parade onlookers and Harlem residents

Yasumasa Morimura,  
*M's self-portrait No.56/B*  
(or 'as Marilyn Monroe')  
1996



turned into the subject of her live portraits, inviting a collective switching of subject position from audience (*We*) to subject (*I*), through the frame of the artwork (*It*). This work offers a perfect example of how art can direct attention towards life by offering a frame or lens through which to look anew, and a switching of hierarchy between so-called 'high culture' and vernacular community art.

O'Grady's *Miscegenated Family Album* 1994 is a series of paired photographs that grew out of the 1980 performance *Nefertiti/Devonia Evangeline*. This piece examined the troubled relationship between the artist and her late sister, Devonia Evangeline, via the juxtaposition of images of the Ancient Egyptian queen Nefertiti and her sister Mutnedjmet. O'Grady was fascinated by the physical and biographical resemblances between Nefertiti and her own sister.



Lynn Hershman, *Roberta's Body Language Chart* 1978

Though the artist's subject matter is deeply personal, she used images that were familiar within a shared understanding of history to address issues of class, racism, ethnography and African American art, approximating her own intimate experience to visual archetypes in the public imagination.

Japanese artist Yasumasa Morimura is, relatedly, known for his photographic remakes of iconic images from art history and pop culture, in which he himself plays the role of famous subjects (p.69). The work is a form of appropriation of mainstream culture, via assimilation. The artist often disregards the original gender or race of the subjects represented, inhabiting their images nevertheless through make-up and costume. In his *Art History* photographs, begun in the early 1990s, he painstakingly re-stages well-known paintings by the likes of Rembrandt, Goya and Frida Kahlo. In the *Actress* series, from 1998, he assumes the persona of Hollywood luminaries such as Marilyn Monroe and Elizabeth Taylor, and in his series *Requiem*, from 2007, he recreates iconic photographs relating to political and cultural life, from Adolf Hitler to Albert Einstein and Chairman Mao. Morimura's fascination with the self-portrait, celebrity, gay and transgender life, art history and popular culture align him closely with the work of Andy Warhol, to whom he pays homage, as well as Cindy Sherman's practice. His desiring insertion of himself into these pictures also comments upon the way in which Western culture has been absorbed and appropriated in his home context of Japan, flagrantly staging a kind of submissive complicity to which he appears personally subject.

American artist Lynn Hershman Leeson's project *Roberta* 1973–8 extended the artist's experiments with the construction of an ur-feminine character that she originally built from a composite of magazine images – blonde, made-up, in feminine clothing – into everyday life. For the best part of a decade, Hershman Leeson lived in the fracture between her apparently real self and her persona, Roberta Breitmore. She recorded her encounters in photographs (taken by a private detective she had commissioned) and in her own diary writings. Hershman Leeson's live portrait as a female stereotype proposed a complex performance of a normative ideal embedded in her real-life situations, thus theatricalising not only her own everyday activities and encounters, but also the wider social context in which Roberta appeared. It is hard to say where this performance begins and ends: what is clear is that the artist's commitment to her performance was extreme, especially given that she was caring for her daughter while managing this dual identity.

Instead of borrowing stereotyped images of femininity from magazine images and replaying them, or exposing their artifice, British artist Cosey Fanni Tutti – who also performed with Genesis P-Orridge in COUM Transmissions in the 1970s and was a founding member of the band Throbbing Gristle in 1976 – took a paid job as a model in porn magazines (p.72). In this way, she put her own image as model into circulation, as well as working as a stripper in the Raymond Revuebar in Soho, London. Her attitude was highly controversial at the time, both in the mainstream press and within feminist networks. Cosey Fanni Tutti, whose name was taken from the Mozart opera *Così fan tutte* ('they [women] all do the same'), pushed the idea of overidentifying with the image of femininity or female sexuality to an extreme – desiring to become, and literally becoming, that image herself by appearing as the object of desire. But as an artist from a low-income, working-class background, estranged from her family, Cosey Fanni Tutti also engaged with the politics of wage labour, as both a real necessity and a way to create a representation that was embedded in real industry. She did not announce herself



Cosey Fanni Tutti,  
*Prostitution* exhibition  
poster, Institute of  
Contemporary Arts,  
London 1976

as an artist while procuring work and participating in the shoots as a model. It was only after her images were published that she would source the magazines to display them in a gallery context. Beyond the psychological implications of performing as a picture, Cosey Fanni Tutti's intervention drew attention to the circuit of labour, desire and money at stake in her participation: she was a paid worker, an object of desire, and an artist with a critical overview, simultaneously.

Taking an alternative approach to embedded performance in character, Hong Kong-born artist Tseng Kwong Chi began a self-portrait series, *East Meets West*, also known as the *Expeditionary Series*, in 1978. This sequence of photographs involved Tseng adopting the guise of a Chinese government official

or dignitary – dressed in what he called his 'Mao suit' and sunglasses – and photographing himself situated, often emotionlessly, in front of iconic tourist sites in the West. Art historian Amy Brandt has observed that the 'performance allowed Tseng to manoeuvre like a chameleon, insinuating himself with equal poise into nightclubs, art openings, beach parties and posh society galas. Yet in nearly every photograph of these encounters, Tseng's unchanging costume and Asian identity mark him as an outsider.'<sup>52</sup> In this work, the artist assimilates himself to a recognisable cliché by appearing as an 'other' within an American or European landscape, one that points to both his belonging (he is recognisable) and his exclusion (he is different). Tseng's work conflates a queer approach to performing identity with a critical take on the racial US politics of the period.

These select examples of work show how, through the 1970s and into the 1980s, a new space for acting and performing began to be used within the two-dimensional realm of the image. Collapsing their own identity with their mediums, artists began to perform as images. They assumed different identities and even enacted those in different social contexts in order to consider the roles of gender, race, class and social standing in the formation of the self. Questions were posed about how one's identity is contingent upon context, but might actively be manipulated. Fiction became a form of political power. Through a variety of approaches, these works reveal an increasing gap between one's literal bodily presence and one's ability to create one or more personae as a picture that intersects with, and intervenes in, a culture of images.

Tseng Kwong Chi,  
*New York, New York* 1979,  
silver gelatin print, 91.4 x 91.4,  
from *East Meets West*  
self-portrait series 1979–89

