

Living in Particularity

I Am Large, I Contain Multitudes is a group exhibition with Marco Bruzzone, Ed Fornieles, FORT, Donna Huanca, Hanne Lippard, Liping Ting, Grace Weaver, Lauryn Youden curated by Nadia Pilchowski within the frame of the programme UP - Unsustainable Privileges by Solvej Helweg Ovesen and Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung

Do I contradict myself?

Very well then I contradict myself,

(I am large, I contain multitudes.)¹

Walt Whitman, 'Song of Myself', 1881/82

We stand alone – each of us as their own cosmos, long since incapable of reading the codes by which our neighbours, along with each one of us, secure their own uniqueness. But why all this striving toward authentic particularities? And what came first – the loss of shared social vanishing points or the late-capitalist imperative of self-staging within the market of multiplicity that alone promises the sole possibility of social success? Or was it simply a matter of our searching for a bit of meaning to attach to our own lives that was involved?

The anthropologist Marc Augé recognised, as early as in the 1990s, how a dissolution of 'reference points for collective identification' appeared to be driving the necessity for the unprecedented 'individual production of meaning'². He attributed this compulsion toward producing meaning to an overabundance of events in our times, a state of affairs he characterised as *supermodernity* without ignoring its paradoxes. Conversely, Andreas Reckwitz describes how factors such as privilege and freedom influence our experiencing of objects, places and other humans to produce a tendency toward a kind of curation of life.³ According to Reckwitz, the search for meaning and the self has become imbued with the pursuit of uniqueness, or *singularity* as he has termed it, which is the expression, not lastly, of a highly ambitious stance toward one's own life.⁴

¹ Walt Whitman, 'Song of Myself', *Leaves of Grass* (New York: 'Deathbed' E-Book Edition, 2005) 247.

² Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (London, New York: Verso, 1995) 37 ff.

³ Cf. Andreas Reckwitz, *Die Gesellschaft der Singularitäten. Zum Strukturwandel der Moderne*, (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2018) 9.

⁴ *Ibid*, Cf 8.

These aspirations are not without burden, insofar as they demand authentic but intense experience. Authenticity alludes to no lesser a criterium than that of ‘genuineness’, whereas the unauthentic is associated with all that is pretentious, or perhaps commercial and standardised. The desire to experience the genuine and extraordinary is, of course, nothing new therein. The value of authenticity can be found within the cultural tradition of Romanticism as much as in, for example, Chinese traditions from the Ming period.⁵ So too is the striving toward an ‘intense life’ paradigmatic for the Romanticist disposition, and it resonates further through the expectant world views of later avant-gardist currents such as Surrealism, Futurism or Constructivism.⁶ Comparably new, however, is the notion that this experiential ideal has, within the framework of consumer capitalism, become a widely shared social phenomenon that entails a never-ending series of escalations and would seem to generate endless loops of feedback, as it were.

What then, to stay with Marc Augé, might a supermodern lifestyle⁷ look like? In the face of persistent, ubiquitous differentiations between lifestyles, any possible description would appear as the mere cliché of what have become typical Instagram narrations: eccentric hobbies and rediscovered religious traditions matched with maximally individualised fashion statements; exclusive events and collectively ecstatic club visitations. Detox recipes are equally as important as the well-elaborated relishing of artworks and rare vegetables, the hype of which nonetheless bears a half-life of a few weeks’ time at best. One’s own view of the world testifies to the notion of originality, and the selfie substantiates one’s own embeddedness within a selected group of friends. Searching for fulfilment in an internationally oriented career, the subject creates for themselves an identity they are to experience as being rich and substantive. Reckwitz speaks, in this context, of a ‘self-complexity’ – the particular specialities of the composed areas of life are what, reciprocally, ought to make the experiencing subject particularly special.⁸

⁵ In painting from the Ming dynasty (1386–1644), landscapes by the painters of the so-called Zhe-school, for example, depict the motif of the figure of the solitary scholar immersed in contemplation of nature – in search of unadulterated, immediate experience. The subject of the ‘scholarly gathering’ depicts, by contrast, the figure in collaborative connoisseurship practice.. Authenticity and uniqueness were dominant themes in the Ming Empire of the 15th and 16th centuries that, due to the increased proliferation of Confucianism and globalisation, was exposed to transformative processes. The pictorial representations of an elite appreciation of art served to delineate political power and differentiate it from the ‘new rich’ of the climbing social classes. One of the most prominent pictures depicting this subject matter is the ‘Elegant Gathering in the Apricot Garden’ from 1437 after Xie Huan (1377-1452), now part of the permanent collection at the MET in New York.

⁶ Cf. Tristan Garcia, ‘The Intense Life: An Ethical Ideal’, e-flux, 87, December 2017, <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/87/164971/the-intense-life-an-ethical-ideal>, [4.5.2018].

⁷ Cf. Gruppe Lifestyle, ‘Mission Statement’, 2017, <http://gruppelifestyle.com/mission-statement> [5.5.2018].

⁸ Reckwitz (2017) 294.

What may sound like arbitrariness actually involves an enormous connoisseurship: computer games, flaxseed for breakfast or rap music are all consumed with a degree of affected discernment that was once viewed as typical with regard to wine and literature. The cultural meanings thereby tied to the selected handlings, objects or events are encoded ones. And along with each code as a language, a new group of understanding individuals emerges – or non-understanding as the case may be. Singularity and the resulting imperative of particularity thus engender competition – or, as Reckwitz would have it, a ‘social-attractivity market’.⁹ Among those who would maintain their presence in this market, overload is a common consequence to high expectations, and complex contradictions are all but infrequent. This becomes apparent when, for example, the drive to strive toward the exceptional is extended to comprise the search for meaning and a sense of wellbeing, while, at the same time, the principle of perpetual striving itself prevents each of these needs or wants from ever faithfully being met. Paradoxes such as these proceed all the way into the central questions as to the nature of individuality itself. For Michaela Ott, the term mirrors the idea of an undivided being. The very aspiration, however, toward distinction through specialness, itself revealing an orientation based upon social frameworks, makes clear the extent to which the purported individual is, in fact, in part heteronomous. To account for the multifaceted, layered influences to which the notion is exposed, she has suggested employing a new term to reflect what would seem rather to comprise the *dividual*.¹⁰ It is amongst charged tensions such as these that **I Am Large, I Contain Multitudes** positions itself, with the aim of making various phenomena of the singular and varied means by which identity is generated tangible and aesthetically experienceable.

By no means, incidentally, do developments such as these stop with the individual, as is not only discernible on the basis of Martina Löw’s conceptualisation of an ‘intrinsic logic of cities’¹¹ but can also be ascertained with great immediacy before the window front of Galerie Wedding. Purportedly authentic characteristics of the ‘multicultural, working-class neighbourhood’ are amalgamated with ever-new, often generic propositions aimed at arousing the interest of a rather internationally oriented public, which ought, in turn, to be enticed through promises of special particularity into discovering the district for themselves – an overlapping of both identity and locational politics from

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ In her book *Dividuationen. Theorien der Teilhabe*, Ott points out previous usages of the term *dividual* by, among others, Gilles Deleuze and outlines three aspects of participation on the part of beings: 1. The biological aspect: at both the micro- and macroscopic levels we are influenced by other organisms; 2. The technological aspect: in our everyday lives, we experience a dependency upon technological means; 3. The cultural aspect: culture is now always a composition of various cultural traditions, the fact of which has been so normalised that one hardly reflects upon it. Cf. Michaela Ott, *Dividuationen. Theorien der Teilhabe* (Berlin: b_books, 2015).

¹¹ Cf. Martina Löw, *Soziologie der Städte* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2008).

which, of course, cultural spaces such as Galerie Wedding are not entirely exempt.

Visitors to the exhibition are pointed, immediately upon entering the gallery space, toward the notion of the formability of identity in relation to the ideas of effort and self-optimisation. The works of the artist **Hanne Lippard** focus on the production of language with the sole aid of her own voice, itself thus becoming a means by which relationships and contradictions between content and form are revealed. In 'The Ssecret to SsucceSs iSs in the Ss-eSs' (2014), she dissects, in well-nigh hypnotic rhythms, a series of vocabulary associated with the word *success*, transforming the s-sounds it contains by emphasising their penetrating sonances. Inspired by a text from a young entrepreneur, Lippard references motivational phrases appropriated from the business world. She seizes thus upon what, in our society, are the dominant motifs of achievement and intensity, not lastly when she employs a certain disquieting tone to float throughout the room the suggestion that one has to know what makes life worth both living and dying for.

It is demands for excessive identity expenditure such as these, long since having dominated professional life as well, to which **Lauryñ Youden** in some measure responds. Youden's work deals with forgotten healing methods and regenerative herbal substances – all the while knowing that the topics of work/life balance and wellness might well tend to constitute essential elements of carefully staged self-care. Her point of departure is her own body, and, in a highly personal manner, she develops performative ceremonies dedicated to spiritual wellbeing. With her installation 'SSS: A Place to Retreat, When I Am Sick (Of You)' (2018), she has created a kind of safe haven, illuminated by pinkish-red daylight and the moonlike glow of selenite lamps, which serve to cleanse the spirit. Acoustically, the space is filled with the sounds of synthesisers and singing bowls that emerged in collaboration with Florian T M Zeisig. His 'modulated binaural beats' comprise the background for Youden's 'You Say I for Me' performance, in which she plays 'crystal singing bowls' and recites parts of her text 'Nocebo' – a narrative handling of the artist's treatment of winter depression diagnosed as Seasonal Affective Disorder on the basis of lucid dreams induced by the ingestion of mugwort tea, and of her confrontations with personal demons thereby.

There is rustling, and there is squealing. Metal scrapes across the floor, or the cracking sound of rending plastic permeates the room. **Liping Ting's** decelerated performances convey the impression that one is witnessing a shamanistic ritual. She herself constitutes the focal point of her work, and, employing self-styled iconography (among which the stone and feather are consistently recurring motifs), she adopts the role of a

spiritual medium, who enables the beholders to become active participants. The process of dialogical sensory perception that ensues, either through touch or synchronised breathing, gives rise to a basal, physical inter-subjectivity. The artist, who studied Philosophy in Taipei and Theatre in Paris, adeptly correlates the questions of 'Self without the Self' and 'Unlocking the Ego' in an intensely sensual experience. In Ting's work, identity is, to be sure, experienced through the physical form, resulting in what would amount to an inversion of Youden's perspective. Whereas Youden 'treats' the body as a more or less isolated entity in reaction to social experience, Ting formulates, through her own physicality, a relationship to the surroundings of the observer. Her movements incorporate elements of traditional Chinese dance and are as ecstatic at times as they are minimal at others. Yet in certain moments, such as those in which she impressively balances the branch of a tree upon her head, one begins to intuit how much discipline her synthesis of body and spirit in fact demands.

It is in a like meditative state that **Donna Huanca's** performers move about the artist's paintings and sculptures. With their layers of worn items of clothing, fibres, acrylic glass plates, rubber and leather bands, her plastic works recall totems – or rather even the artist herself, whenever a long braid is incorporated, as often is the case. Brought to life through their painted, breathing bodies, her paintings and objects provide the performers with protection and a means by which to camouflage themselves from the gazes of the beholders. The body painting takes up different cultural traditions, through which affiliation to groups and social status is communicated. Juxtaposed with this is the use of make-up and cosmetics, with which the singular individual distinguishes or dissociates themselves from the masses. In her choreographies, Huanca works with people who are undergoing physical or psychic transformational changes, the processes of which she follows over periods of years.

Marco Bruzzone references, in his work, visual representations of power and the contradictions inherent to constructions of national and individual identity, which he handles as being represented, in his own case, by his particular social environment. The artist produces a kind of monument to his own identity reflecting people relevant to his own personal history and contemporaneous circumstances. 'Plant Stand in Aerodynamica-Style' is a 'camp appropriation' of a fascist design. Bruzzone emulates the technique employed by Futurist Renato Bertelli to represent Mussolini in 1933. The turned head of the pervasive dictator looking in every direction at once was produced by spinning his facial profile to create a 360-degree continuous portrait. In Bruzzone's column, heads of the artist's nearest and dearest are arranged one on top of the other

to support an exquisitely exotic plant, thereby converging to form a totemic sculpture that is likewise akin to a status symbol typically integral to the office environment.

Once more prescient today – not lastly with regard to current national debates – the discussion about conceptions concerning the generation of identity within the context of environment offers insight into a notion of individuality that would seem far removed from the idea of indivisible uniqueness but is nonetheless to be surveyed here as the expression of an individual construction of identity.

FORT, consisting of Jenny Kropp and Alberta Niemann, make use of everyday urban objects in their installations, videos and performances. They subtly subvert the ordinariness that these objects embody and create surreal rooms in which one attempts to reorient oneself. The question is thereby posed as to whether one's own carefully constructed identity is still compatible with the new surroundings. Upon entering the screening room at Galerie Wedding, visitors get the impression of having entered a nightclub – one with a strict door policy: you have to know the codes to get in. Behind the door, FORT's video work 'The Shining' is presented, in which children dance to a slowed Techno track. The camera lingers for a time on each of the protagonists, whose movements alternate between childlike gestures and mimicked posturing. Within the group, each person's particularities become noticeable. One girl looks directly into the camera lens while blithely dancing; others rave like professionals. Two girls in twin party outfits mirror each other's moves. FORT poses the question: 'What is still inherent or intuitive, and what is manufactured for extraneous appraisal?'

Unstable, unfamiliar situations also constitute points of departure in **Ed Fornieles'** works, with which he aims to dismantle normality. In 'Test Studies' (2017), participants in a roleplay experience simulated crisis-scenarios, in which they are encouraged to redefine their own personalities and sets of social bonds. The video shows four juveniles describing their experiences after having roleplayed various predetermined scenarios involving extreme situations and extraordinary circumstances. One boy describes his feelings at becoming a father and his anxiety regarding complications during birth. In another scene, the youths describe how they experienced the approaching of a deadly, grey cloud, and how their feelings of shock turned to resignation, finally giving way to Zenlike quiescence. In other works, Fornieles has – in like manner employing techniques of simulation – addressed the notion of an active construction of identity. These have included, for example, exploring the possibilities of ritualistic self-healing in 'Jupiter Ascending' (2015), or attempting, by means of self-management and biohacking, to overcome the certainties of human limitations in his film 'Der Geist: Flesh

Feast' (2016). The artist glides therein – in the form of an avatar (a cartoon fox) – through a maelstrom of digital images while espousing the effects of the so-called 'Bulletproof-Diät'. The participating viewers ought, he urges, to create a 'positive mental picture' so that, thus having transformed their own weaknesses into personal strengths, they can 'take control' of their own lives.

Traces of this aspiration to 'take control' – a favourite imperative of popular self-help literature – , are also discernible in **Grace Weaver's** work. The figures in her images survey their own bodies or let their gazes wander. It is scenes of everyday urban life and free-time repose that Weaver finally shares with the other artists in the exhibition. The nonchalant bodily twists of her figures – some bent over smartphones, others promenading through the city like Millennials in an advertisement spot – border on the satirical. Weaver's painting is more a construction of atmospheres than any narration of stories. Decisive in her work is an intensive, colourful palette and her compositional technique, which brings the horizontal line up close to the upper edge of the canvas. Through her use of this perspective, recalling as it does the work of George Grosz, the beholder is brought in particularly close proximity to the somewhat exaggerated protagonists, each entirely immersed in their own activities. Grace Weaver's childhood in the 1990s was marked by the toy worlds of Polly Pocket and Barbie, in which a leisurely, often luxurious lightness was emphatically celebrated. The commercial one-dimensionality of that time would appear to be mirrored by the current archetypical character of the artist, which affords one with immediate access to her paintings. It is behind this seemingly easily decodable 'aesthetic territory of cuteness'¹² in particular that, for Weaver, a far greater complexity is concealed than one might first attribute to her 'girlie' figures – something that could be read as an inversion of the common compulsion to strive toward singularity that not uncommonly exhausts itself in a merely alleged complexity.

Text: Nadia Pilchowski

Translation: Nathan Moore

¹² Grace Weaver alludes, in her usage of this term, to Sianne Ngai's book *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting*, quoted here after Sebastian Frenzel, 'Wieder scheitern, weiter malen!' [my translation], *Monopol*, 10, (2016) 62.