

POLIXENI PAPAPETROU



A
Paradox Performative

POLIXENI PAPAPETROU



THIS PAGE
*Olympia as Lewis Carroll's
Xie Kitchin as Chinaman on
tea boxes (on duty)* 2002
type C photograph
105 x 105 cm

FRONT COVER
*Suzie, Elvis fan at home,
Melbourne* 1989
selenium toned gelatin
silver photograph
40.7 x 40.7 cm

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A
Performative
Paradox

FOREWORD



Drag queen wearing
cut out dress 1993
gelatin silver photograph
28.5 x 28.5 cm

NAOMI CASS

Can you imagine this gutsy, petite Greek woman in her mid 20's—a lawyer by trade but one seriously considering a life outside the law—turning up to the Miss Alternative World Ball at the San Remo Ballroom in Carlton, Melbourne and asking to photograph the drag queens against the exuberant flocked wallpaper, and returning every year from 1988 to 1995. Or similarly, returning on a regular basis, from 1986 to 1993, to the Melbourne General Cemetery in Carlton to photograph earnest Elvis Presley fans in their annual homage. Polixeni Papapetrou was inspired as much by her love of Diane Arbus's photography as her outsider status as the child of immigrants with a profound respect for difference, in a period in Australia where being Greek was not considered particularly glamorous. From the onset Papapetrou addressed her subject with respect, rigor, determination and a fine understanding of photography's history and theory.

In this exhibition, selected by Professor Anne Marsh in consultation with the artist, a particular thread has been selected across Papapetrou's practice—that of the performative—from her early documentary work through to her directorial work with her children from 2002 to the present. With intentions ranging from playful to the transgressive, Papapetrou's subjects wrangle with identity. For a younger audience, this exhibition presents Papapetrou's earlier, perhaps lesser-known black and white work in the context of her highly-regarded staged photography. In her catalogue essay Anne Marsh provides a theoretical context for considering the performative in Papapetrou's early work. Insights of a practical and personal nature are beautifully rendered in the recent interview between Papapetrou and Natalie King.

Papapetrou has contributed to photography stepping up as an art form over the last few decades—as opposed to being a tool of commerce, science or the news cycle—and was an early adopter of editioning photographic images. Her contribution to the sector can also be recognised in her astonishing tenure as board member of the Centre for Contemporary Photography from 1987 to 2005.

For his spontaneous and generous support of this catalogue, I acknowledge and thank William Bowness. I am delighted to say that following its exhibition at Centre for Contemporary Photography, *A Performative Paradox* will travel to Horesham Regional Art Gallery in late 2013.

Finally, I thank Papapetrou's subjects—the Marilyn's; the Elvises; circus workers and body builders; the lovely transvestites; and most of all her children, Olympia and Solomon, and their friends—each for playing their part.

Naomi Cass, CCP Director.

A PERFORMATIVE PARADOX

ANNE MARSH

Polixeni Papapetrou's early experiments with photography fit into the documentary tradition but they also collide with the concept of the performative. In some respects this is driven by the subjects she chooses to work with, especially the drag queens, circus personalities, Elvis Presley fans and Marilyn Monroe impersonators she photographed in the late 1980s and early 1990s. All of these people are, one way or another, performing identities.

In a talk given at the Victorian College of the Arts (VCA) in 1995 Papapetrou said that the theme of this work was the "notion of 'cultural otherness' and the 'other' as marginalised". As an emerging artist, she was pleased when this work was compared to the works of Diane Arbus, but pointed out that her images were informed by her own experience as 'other', growing up as a Greek immigrant in a white, Anglo-Saxon, male-dominated culture in Australia in the 1960s and 1970s. From the beginning, Papapetrou drew a firm distinction between her picturing of the 'other' and that of other photographers. Although this may appear as an intentional fallacy, it is also evident, given what was to follow, that Papapetrou embraced the performative in various ways. Like many artists producing work in Australia in the 1990s this concept of the performative was, at first, infected by identity politics. In these early series it is apparent that there is a paradox. These would-be documents undo themselves, in part because the sitters are performing 'themselves' but, in doing so, they are performing against stereotypes of normativity. On one hand the photographs are documents of subcultures but identity in this context is a performance.

The images of Elvis impersonators and fans as well as the various series depicting Marilyn impersonators clearly mine this paradox. The Elvis memorial, a cenotaph at the Melbourne General Cemetery, and the fans who frequent it present a case study in photographs that impels the informed viewer to consider the boundaries between 'straight' documentary images and the performative, as it is outlined by Judith Butler.

A short digression into theory is necessary here. The shift from a linguistic turn to a performative turn stresses the embodied nature of experience. This shift preceded identity politics in the 1980s and the edicts of post/structuralism that insisted that the subject was "always already written" by a language over which it had little



Lucy Eramo bringing carnations for Elvis on the anniversary of his birthday, Elvis Memorial Melbourne 1990
selenium toned gelatin silver photograph
40.7 x 40.7 cm

control (Althusser).¹ This embodiment, which is characteristic of the performative, is not an essentialist view. Butler's point is that gender is a performed normativity, she says: "Performativity is a matter of reiterating or repeating the norms by which one is constituted: it is not a radical fabrication of a gendered self".² It is interesting to note that Butler, who is often considered to be a deconstructivist, draws on the works of the anthropologist, Victor Turner, and his concept of liminal acts—in between states—which has been important in the field of performance studies. Jon McKenzie argues that Butler twists Turner's theory of ritual, seeing normativity where he saw transgression.³

In the *Elvis Immortal* (1987-2002) series and the various bodies of work depicting drag queens, Papapetrou appears to traverse the complexities of the performative as confounded by Turner via Butler. The Elvis photographs are close to the documentary tradition but they are performative in Butler's sense as the fans act out the normativity that is the Elvis persona (the celebrity image) but in their sartorial identity they pursue a transgression. In the series *Searching for Marilyn* (2002), Papapetrou takes this a step further and camps it up by juxtaposing the drag queen Marilyns with classical renditions of various female muses and religious figures from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The same ploy is amplified in *Body/Building* (1997-2003) where we see male and female bodies buffed and enhanced juxtaposed with classical architectural structures photographed in Melbourne's CBD.

The paradox of the performative comes to life in these images as we clearly see the normativity of Butler's gendered performance messed about. Not only, nor exclusively, in the bodies that perform these personae, but more specifically in the subjects' intentions and the artist's rendition. Here Papapetrou and her sitters make gender trouble through representation, through the juxtapositions which jolt the viewer, insisting that s/he apprehend the limits of sexuality, the would-be 'real' body and its performativity. This is not to suggest that Papapetrou has become philosopher or academic, only to underline that in the hands of the artist limits can be pushed and contradictions at that limit can create paradoxes that extend the realm of critical thought. At the same time the artist preserves the integrity of the subject—once the 'other' but now a collaborator—manifesting both Butler's normative and Turner's transgression.

The works that follow from the 2000s until today are more widely known and have been embraced by the art world internationally as some of the most powerful and provocative works in the field of performative photography. In the early 2000s Papapetrou turned her attention to her own children and they became the performers in the pictures. Beginning with her first-born child, Olympia, the artist charted her daughter's playacting and encouraged her participation in the photographic process. Photographing children in today's society is fraught due to the moral panic that we experience when minors are photographed. Society tends

¹ Althusser's Marxist-structuralist analysis of the subject is outlined in his essay 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses', *Lenin and Philosophy, and Other Essays*, Trans. Ben Brewster, London: New Left Books, 1971, pp. 127-188.



Olympia as Lewis Carroll's Beatrice Hatch before White Cliffs 2003
type C photograph
105 x 105 cm

to foreclose on such images, even when they are clearly art photographs, simply because the myth of the medium is predicated on an index of reality. Papapetrou was not immune to this charade and was famously embroiled in tabloid controversy when photographs of Olympia after Lewis Carroll's nineteenth-century images became caught up in the scandal surrounding the censorship of Bill Henson's photographs of semi-nude adolescents. What the press failed to acknowledge was that Papapetrou's photographs were not romantic renditions but carefully researched images that paid homage to Lewis Carroll as an advocate for children's rights. The signature image from this series—*Olympia as Lewis Carroll's Beatrice Hatch before White Cliffs* (2003)—is included in the exhibition since it is a catalyst that appears to spur Papapetrou on, driving her deeper into a performative practice that becomes more narrative and fantastical in the following decade.

*Dr Anne Marsh is Professor of Art History & Theory
at MADA—Monash Art Design & Architecture.*

² Judith Butler 'Critically Queer', *Gay and Lesbian Quarterly*, no. 1, 1993, p. 22.

³ See Jon McKenzie, 'Genre Trouble: (The) Butler Did It', in Peggy Phelan and Jill Lane (eds.), *The Ends of Performance*, New York and London: New York University Press, 1988, pp. 220-228.

THE SECOND BIGGEST LOVE AFFAIR:

Polixeni Papapetrou in conversation with Natalie King, December 2012–February 2013.

Over three filmed sessions Polixeni Papapetrou was interviewed by Natalie King and filmed by Roy Chu in her home-studio in Fitzroy, Melbourne. This is an extract of these candid and revealing conversations, augmented with further reflexion by the artist.

NATALIE KING

Initially you trained as a lawyer and then became a practicing photographer. Can you tell me about this transition from different fields?

POLIXENI PAPAPETROU

In my mid-twenties, I was working as a lawyer and decided that it might be good to do something outside of work. I bought a 35mm camera and started making pictures—including some of homeless men who lived at a city mission—that looked like Diane Arbus's. Later I bought a square format camera and suddenly the world and my vocation fell into place.

Can you expand on the idea of otherness in Arbus's work in relation to world-making or inner worlds?

Being a child of immigrant parents in Melbourne in the 1960s, I felt that I didn't belong in Anglo culture. When I started school I didn't speak any English and felt like an outsider. I started looking at people who didn't belong and I knew what they were going through. We were cut from the same cloth.

The characters that you depict attract ambiguous narratives or stories without endings. You have said that the tragedy that is the end is present in the beginning. Can you elaborate?

When I gave birth to my daughter Olympia in 1997, a feeling of sadness swept over me because I understood that with birth comes death; birth and death are intertwined. It became important for me to photograph my children in a way that made their age and character elastic.

In *Between Worlds* (2009), I dressed the children as animals to look at the affinity that children share with animals by collapsing both animal and child body into one. *The Dream Keepers* (2012) was a natural progression in that I merged the bodies of young and old.

If you're lucky enough to reach the end of your natural life, some childlike traits might begin to re-emerge. I find it beautiful that we can 'regress' to a position of lesser self-consciousness but greater imaginative self-determination.

Can you discuss the importance of literature in your practice given the backdrop to this interview is your vast library which you draw upon to make your work?

I love to collect books and get signed copies by the authors. It's one of the great loves of my life; other than making pictures. I especially love Australian history and studied it at Melbourne University with Geoffrey Blainey.

Can you tell me about your preoccupation with clowns?

In the late '80s and early '90s I spent time at Ashton's and Silver's Circuses photographing clowns and performers. I returned to this idea in 2011 when I accumulated vintage costumes, masks and wigs. I'm interested in the history of theatrical types from Renaissance times in Italy and in Shakespeare's writings. I want to portray the clown both as an historical figure and an element of the unconscious, rather than as a more frenzied figure who disorients the audience.

Can you discuss the role of caricature, pantomime and the emotional range that we associate with clowns?

Yes, they're somewhat liberating. The clown's mask is meant to camouflage the real person and create an identity as the outsider, the fool, the comedic, the figure of fun. But I am more interested in uncovering the intelligent sadness in the fool.

I wanted to ask you about your current predicament and illness, whether you think this has impacted on the way that you have made your work?

Before my illness my work contained prescribed narratives. Whether I was restaging Lewis Carroll's works in *Dreamchild* (2003) and *Wonderland* (2004) or looking at the nineteenth-century experience of children in the Australian landscape (*Haunted Country* 2006, *Games of Consequence* 2008), narrative was present. Later it became important for me to create the images in my head, which I fancy pry into the unconscious. Sometimes they document my memory. Many of the characters in *The Dreamkeepers* were based on the people I saw while growing up in Port Melbourne being oblivious whilst walking down the street in their dressing gowns.

The Mystical Mothers (2011) portrays female twins with a pusher and their children are identical. This picture is loosely referencing Diane Arbus's photograph of the identical twins, but I also remember spending hours pushing my baby brother around the street.

What is the role of props and caricature in your more recent work?

Before I started photographing children, the people I photographed came with their own props. The drag queens wore elaborate evening gowns, the Elvis Presley fans wore '50s rockabilly gear, the wrestlers wore amazing capes and masks and even the body builders wore sun-tanning lotion to make their bodies look bronzed and healthy. It made me aware of the role of dress in constructing identity and gender. In later work, however, the props are about an environment as much as an attribute or token, rather like the scenic backdrops or locations in the landscape.

It's fascinating that many of your props have come from the theatre world given your work is melodramatic and staged. I'm wondering about your performative and theatrical photographic environments.

This comes from my love of nineteenth-century photography full of narrative and inspired by theatre. The Victorians were avid theatre goers and brought the language of theatre and performance into photography. Julia Margaret Cameron uses theatre, costume and performance in her photography as did her peers Charles Dodgson (Lewis Carroll) and Oscar Rejlander. This photography in the tableaux vivant tradition has inspired me.

Let's return to the quiet and backstage moments of your early photographs.

I have found situations where I don't photograph the person in context, but have taken them aside. At the Miss Alternative World Ball at the San Remo Ballroom in Melbourne, there were a thousand drag queens, but I was able to pull each one aside



*Robyn and Ross Ramadge
on the 10th anniversary
of Elvis' death, Elvis
Memorial Melbourne 1987
selenium toned gelatin
silver photograph
40.7 x 40.7 cm*

as she walked through the door. At the Elvis memorial there were up to one hundred devotees, but it feels as if there's only one person with me. From the outset, I want to make pictures about people and the roles that they take on in their lives.

I am intrigued by the existential implications in your work.

Existence is the biggest mystery of our lives, grappling with what it means to be human. We live in a moment which is also a world in itself, full of consciousness and dreaming. To sum up that mystery is beyond science and it can only be alluded to through metaphors and images, which is ultimately what the work aspires to be.

There is enormous profundity in your work and I was wondering about how your children were so visibly depicted and now they're subsumed by disguise and masquerade, disappearing.

True, but even as Alice, Olympia is not quite herself. But in later work, I felt that I could say more about the human condition if the person's identity was unknown. By concealing their identity, they and I can speak of an archetype. By masking my children they became nobody, but at the same time everybody.

When you're photographing in the landscape, do you sometimes adopt contingencies, mistakes or the unforeseen?

This is what I wait for. The children self-direct because they're in their bodies, in the costume and in character; they know what they need to do. I often wait and watch the children to see how they relate to one another. In the process of looking the picture will emerge. They are so comfortable before the camera and I want to photograph their ease, that fluidity and suppleness and reflect an empathy with the subject.

What is your key influence?

The simple one is to observe life and people but then to think how it could yield a general insight as a picture. It's to think of the image as writing, a search for a poetic metaphor as well as visibility. I develop characters in my work as would a playwright or writer, which is why I'm drawn to the overlap between literature and photography, namely theatre and performance.



*The Flying Cards #2 2004
type C photograph
105 x 105 cm*

How would you like your work to be remembered?

As an act of love between myself and my children. Even when I was photographing drag queens and body builders, I made each photograph with love. For me, photography has never been an exploitative act—although a friend, Martin Parr, once said to me that all photography is a form of exploitation.

When I look into the camera I feel a deep connection with the person whose image I am taking. Making pictures is the second biggest love affair of my life after my family.

*Natalie King is a curator, writer, editor and the Director
of Utopia@Asialink, University of Melbourne.*



LEFT
Body/Building #2 1997-2003
 light jet print
 42 x 126 cm

BELOW
Body/Building #4 1997-2003
 light jet print
 42 x 126 cm



ABOVE
Muse 2002
 light jet print
 80 x 240 cm

RIGHT
Vale 2002
 light jet print
 80 x 240 cm





*Laughing Clown,
Silver's Circus 1990
pigment ink print
45.8 x 45.8 cm*



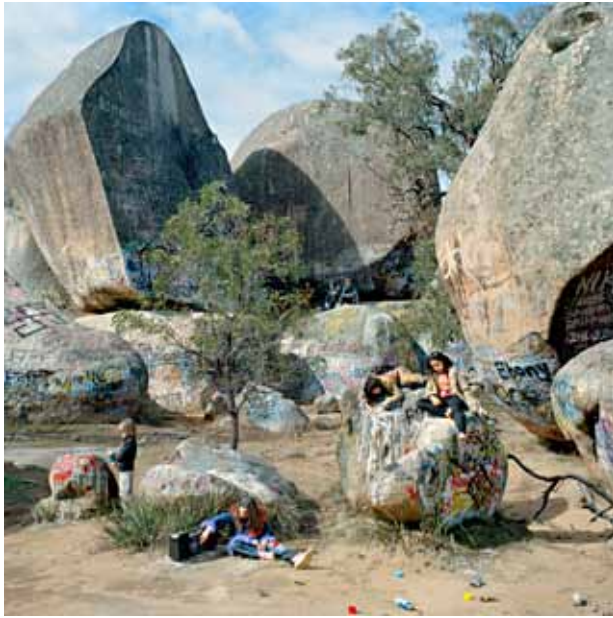
*Clown in striped pants,
Silver's Circus 1990
pigment ink print
45.8 x 45.8 cm*



ABOVE
*Baby Clown, Ashton's
Circus 1990
pigment ink print
45.8 x 45.8 cm*

LEFT
*Lion Tamer, Silver's
Circus 1989
pigment ink print
45.8 x 45.8 cm*





Sisters Rocks 2008
pigment ink print
105 x 105 cm



Salt Man 2013
pigment ink print
120 x 120 cm



The Wimmera 1864 #1 2006
pigment ink print
105 x 105 cm



The Wanderer 2009
pigment ink print
105 x 105 cm

ASHTON'S AND SILVER'S CIRCUS		BETWEEN WORLDS		BODY/BUILDING	
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				MELANCHOLIA	
				<i>Grief</i> 2013 pigment ink print, 130 x 90 cm	Inside Rear Cover

MISS ALTERNATIVE WORLD BALL
(SAN REMO BALLROOM, MELBOURNE)

Drag queen holding corsage 1993
gelatin silver photograph, 28.5 x 28.5 cm

Drag queen in ball gown with partner 1992
gelatin silver photograph, 28.5 x 28.5 cm

Drag queen in leopard print coat 1993
gelatin silver photograph, 28.5 x 28.5 cm

Drag queen in satin dress 1993
gelatin silver photograph, 28.5 x 28.5 cm

Drag queen wearing black feather dress 1992
gelatin silver photograph, 28.5 x 28.5 cm

Drag queen wearing cut out dress 1993
gelatin silver photograph, 28.5 x 28.5 cm

Drag queen wearing feather boa dress 1992
gelatin silver photograph, 28.5 x 28.5 cm

Drag queen wearing feather hat 1993
gelatin silver photograph, 28.5 x 28.5 cm

Drag queen wearing long black gloves 1993
gelatin silver photograph, 28.5 x 28.5 cm

Drag queen wearing off the shoulder dress 1992
gelatin silver photograph, 28.5 x 28.5 cm

2

Drag queen wearing tiara 1989
gelatin silver photograph, 28.5 x 28.5 cm

Drag queen with bow hair arrangement 1992
gelatin silver photograph, 28.5 x 28.5 cm

Drag queen with cigarette holder 1993
gelatin silver photograph, 28.5 x 28.5 cm

Drag queen with star wand 1992
gelatin silver photograph, 28.5 x 28.5 cm

Drag queens wearing diamante earrings 1989
gelatin silver photograph, 28.5 x 28.5 cm

Drag queens with masks 1992
gelatin silver photograph, 28.5 x 28.5 cm

PHANTOMWISE

Gatsby Gal 2003
pigment ink print, 85 x 85 cm

Indian Brave 2002
pigment ink print, 85 x 85 cm

22

22

SEARCHING FOR MARILYN

Muse 2002
light jet print, 80 x 240 cm

Vale 2002
light jet print, 80 x 240 cm

13

14

THE DREAMKEEPERS

The Mystical Mothers 2011
pigment ink print, 105 x 105 cm

THE GHILLIES

Salt Man 2013
pigment ink print, 120 x 120 cm

17

WONDERLAND

The Beating Drums 2004
type C photograph, 105 x 105 cm

The Flying Cards #2 2004
type C photograph, 105 x 105 cm

Rear
Cover

11

20

The Encounter 2006
pigment ink print
105 x 105 cm



BIOGRAPHY



ABOVE
Indian Brave 2002
pigment ink print
85 x 85 cm

LEFT
Gatsby Gal 2003
pigment ink print
85 x 85 cm



Polixeni Papapetrou is an Australian photomedia artist who explores relationships between history, contemporary culture, landscape, identity and childhood. Her subject matter has included Elvis Presley fans, Marilyn Monroe impersonators, drag queens, circus performers, wrestlers and body builders. Since 2002, Papapetrou has turned her focus to childhood. She reflects upon numerous interlocking facets of growing up, drawing upon ideas of childhood from nineteenth-century photography and literature (*Dreamchild* 2003 and *Wonderland* 2004); exploring the power of dress-ups (*Phantomwise* 2002); revisiting the experience of childhood and loss in colonial Australia (*Haunted Country* 2006); reflecting upon a lost freedom and the regulated lives of children today (*Games of Consequence* 2008); looking at the magical affinity that children have with animals and their social connotations (*Between Worlds* 2009–2012); pondering the roles that children mimic in older people (*The Dreamkeepers* 2012) or the psychoanalytical puzzle of a child who disappears through disguise, only to rear up uncannily, like the return of the repressed (*The Ghillies* 2013).

Papapetrou holds a PhD from Monash University (2007), an MA Media Arts from RMIT University (1997) and an LLB/BA from the University of Melbourne (1984). She has held over 50 solo exhibitions in Australia and internationally, and in 2011 the Australian Centre for Photography, Sydney, held her first retrospective. Papapetrou has participated at major international photographic festivals including Fotográfica Bogotá, Bogotá, Columbia, 2013; Noorderlicht Photofestival, Friesland, the Netherlands, 2012; 3rd Biennale Photoquai at Le musée du quai Branly, Paris, France, 2011; Pingyao International Photography Festival, Pingyao, China, 2010; Mesiatic Fotografie, Bratislava, Slovakia, 2010; Athens Festival of Photography, Athens, Greece, 2010; Seoul International Photography Festival, Seoul, Korea, 2008; and 'Le Mois de la Photo', Montreal, Canada, 2005. Papapetrou has participated in over 70 group exhibitions at national and international venues, including the National Arts Center, Tokyo, Japan; The Museum of Photography, Seoul, Korea; Kuandu Museum of Fine Arts, Taipei National University of the Arts, Taipei, China; De Cordova Museum and Sculpture Park, Massachusetts, USA; Museum of Photographic Arts, San Diego, USA; and Aperture Gallery, New York, USA.

Papapetrou's work is held in public collections in Australia and the USA, and in corporate and private collections in Australia, England, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Belgium and the USA.

Her work appears in over 180 articles, citations and essays including Naomi Rosenblum, *A History of Women Photographers*, Abbeville Press, New York, USA, 2010; Anne Marsh, *Look: Australian Photography Now*, MacMillan Publishers, Australia, 2010; Anne Higonnet, *Presumed Innocence: Photographic Perspectives of Children*, De Cordova Museum, Massachusetts, USA, 2008; and Susan McCulloch, *The New McCulloch's Encyclopedia of Australian Art*, Aus Art Editions in association with The Miegunyah Press, Melbourne, Australia, 2006.

Papapetrou has received five New Work Grants from the Australia Council and three grants from Arts Victoria for international touring and professional development. She was awarded an Australian Post-Graduate Research Award for her doctorate and in 2009 received the Josephine Ulrick & Win Schubert Photography Award.

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CCP ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A more generous and well-organised artist could not be imagined, and CCP thanks Polixeni Papapetrou for her engagement in this exhibition. Polixeni's able team, including Robert Nelson, Olympia Nelson, Solomon Nelson and Effie Papapetrou are acknowledged for their significant contributions. Also on the team, CCP is most grateful to Olivia Poloni for her splendid and professional curatorial work, essential in realising this exhibition.

On the basis of their longstanding engagement with Papapetrou's work, Anne Marsh and Natalie King stepped forward with enthusiasm to work on this exhibition and CCP acknowledges both for their generous and pivotal roles. William Bowness has enabled the production of this catalogue through his generous financial support, which CCP gratefully acknowledges. Karra Rees, CCP Managing Curator and Joseph Johnson, CCP Design and Communications Coordinator, have brought a particular enthusiasm in realising this exhibition and catalogue.

RIGHT
Grief 2013
pigment ink print
130 x 90 cm

REAR COVER
The Beating Drums 2004
type C photograph
105 x 105 cm





First published for the exhibition
A Performative Paradox
 Polixeni Papapetrou

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 24 May—14 July 2013

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**ARTS
 VICTORIA**



THE VISUAL ARTS AND CRAFT STRATEGY



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