

A Performative Paradox.

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 and Elvis 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 VCA in 1995 Papapetrou said that the theme of this work was the "notion of 'cultural otherness' and the 'other' as marginalized". 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 from 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 70s. 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 Elvis and Marilyn series 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 control (Althusser). 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".¹ 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.²

In the Elvis and drag queen series, 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*, Papapetrou takes this a step further and camps it up by juxtaposing the drag queen Marylins with classical renditions of various female muses and religious figures from the 17th and 18th centuries. The same ploy is amplified in the *Body Builders'* series 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 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 19th 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 advocator 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, Professor of Art History & Theory
MADA—Monash Art Design & Architecture.

Endnotes

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

² 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.