



An Error of Identification

Sylvain Menétrey

The wave of protests brought about by the Black Lives Matter movement, coming after the lockdown imposed by the spread of the coronavirus, invites a comparison between this political and epidemical moment and the context that prevailed in the late 1980s, when AIDS was causing so much death in Western countries. The art and activism of the period have been thoroughly revisited over the past few years by art institutions. In the following text, I have freely adapted the disidentification methodology of the American artist Bradley Kronz to navigate recent works, exhibitions, and institutional trends. The aim is to create historical short-circuits in order to point up certain traits of the contemporary history of exhibitions and institutions in their approach to identity.





Anton Perich, *Victor Hugo Rojas*, 1978. Screen shot.

This text is the outcome of an error. Anton Perich's video *Victor Hugo Rojas* (1978) was included in *Bizarre Silks, P etc.*, the group show that Nick Mauss put together at Basel's Kunsthalle. While watching the piece, I thought I recognized another video seen elsewhere the day before, *The Spark between L and D* (1988) by the artist Kathleen White. *Spark Christina Ramberg en dialogue*, curated by Anna Gritz and mounted at 49 Nord 6 Est - Frac Lorraine in Metz. Although comparable mummification scene, in reality they largely diverge in terms of narrative and atmosphere. All the same I wasn't completely by chance. This feeling of *déjà-vu* was suggested by the exhibitions in question, which brought together recent works of art. So I am going to use that initial error of identification as a method of investigation and consider those that raged in the 1980s.



Kathleen White, *The Spark between L and D*, 1988. Screen shot.

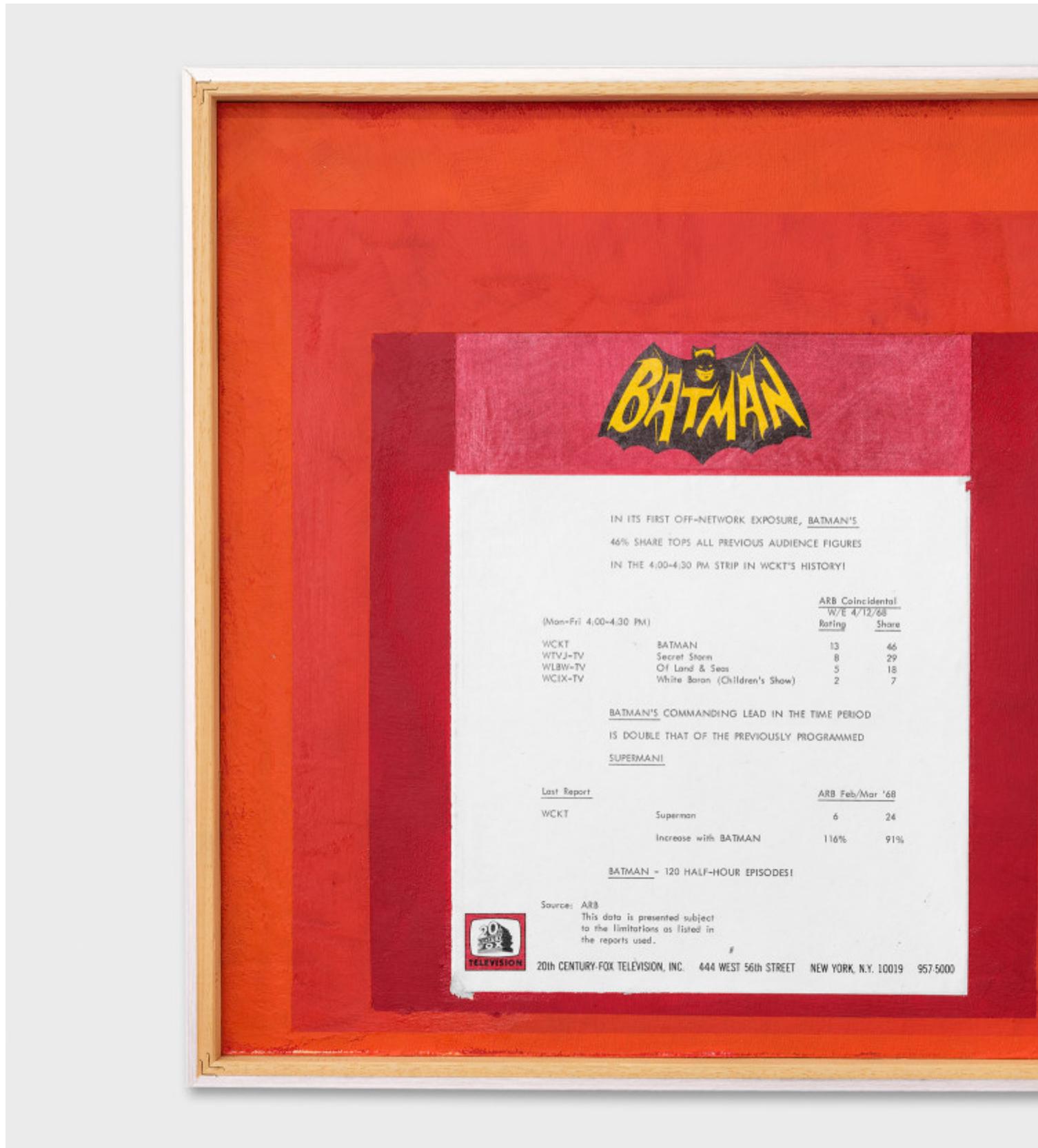
The shows from which the works of Kathleen White and Anton Perich are drawn explore the body's relationship to a queer and feminist perspective. The AIDS crisis and the way it reconfigured representation is one of the narratives that is interesting to question the contemporary rereading of the art of that period by cultural institutions just when they have of exclusion they perpetuate.^[1] To better grasp the position of cultural institutions vis-à-vis questions of identity, this struggle, acting as if 2020 were 1988.

While this approach may flatten out historical differences, it is nevertheless based on certain parallels. Like AIDS, we communities in the 1980s and '90s, in particular gays, the novel coronavirus is provoking in the United States a high among Americans. AIDS brought to light systemic homophobia and racism. The former was vigorously combatted by numerous remains a major problem with serious health consequences. Proof of this lies in a petition^[2] by Black Lives Matter in additional means of support for persons of color, who find themselves on the front lines of the crisis because they are exercise at-risk professions, and are more likely to suffer from comorbidities. The police violence that set off today's system which the Covid-19 has shined a light on. So it seems to me quite productive to think about these historical even practices of making art and mounting joint exhibitions, by taking as my starting point that moment of ambiguous pleasure superimposed two rastered video images in Basel.

Detour by a long hallway

Before analyzing Anton Perich's and Kathleen White's works, I am going to allow myself a digression on the American *Long Hallway*, which I cocurated with Nicolas Brulhart at Forde in 2018. In that exhibition, Kronz explored the dizzying facing intertextuality, and proposed a deviant system of identification which will guide me in my approach to the works.

During our preliminary conversations, Nicolas and I asked Kronz about a minor esthetic pattern of contemporary art *Hüttenästhetik*. In a troubling way, varnished wood, half-timbering, and exposed beams were emerging in his works appearing in exhibition design and display in German-speaking Europe. It eventually became clear to us, this visual i.e., the neo-Tudor style in fashion in New York suburbs over in America, and the Germanic medieval folklore dear to was appropriating pompous kitsch while others were doing sniggering antimodern throwbacks to the authentic. With simply note that Donald Trump spent his childhood in a half-timbered house in Queens that is now an address listed on



Bradley Kronz, *Long Hallway, Forde*, 2018. Photo: Julien Gremaud. Courtesy Forde.

For his *Long Hallway* show, Kronz exhibited a series of painting-collages made up of embedded squares like Josef Albers' (1950-1976). Each work constituted an enigma, referencing mostly minor figures from the culture industry and the history of art. Albers' supposedly closed neutral system meanings and fragments of identity, including Albers', an artist who came to the United States, where he taught at the protohippy Black Mountain College in North Carolina before joining Yale's teaching staff. Passengers of that long hallway connecting European modernism and the American counterculture. In Kronz's work, this involved an ironic reassignment of the biographical in the work of art.



View of the exhibition, Bradley Kronz, *Long Hallway*, curated by Sylvain Menétry and Nicolas Brulhart, Forde, 2018. Photo: Julien

At the center of the Forde space, a television set looking like a piece of sculpture was showing a video made up of frames in which various characters, facing a pile of photographs, suddenly experience a revelation. The video made possible the connection between these stories of an epiphany and a public investigator who had to reconstruct a certain meaning from a forest of images dissolved in the geometrical gradations of his paintings. Watching the two underground scenes of mummification meandered through the exhibition, hours of each other reminded me of that same excitement and dizzying realization in searching for meaning within the artworks. The contemporary echoes. Yet, just as Kronz's paintings summon us to understand it, identification is a mug's game that obscures the enigma. It is that gap – which we viewers can fit ourselves into – that the shows mounted by Frac Lorraine and Basel's Kunsthalle

Inaugural scene

In the video documenting her performance piece *The Spark between L and D*, Kathleen White is dressed as a nurse and singing into a microphone. She hums George Benson's *On Broadway* until a bandage is stuck to her mouth, reducing her to silence. This is a recording of a performance piece, or more accurately a ritual, which also contains his mummification scene. The performance is set in a room where a man, naked and lying on his stomach, has his body anointed with shaving cream and talcum powder, then wrapped with strips of white cloth. Bare-chested young men. Those in the know will recognize the future mustachioed gay porn star Chad Douglas[4] looking at the camera. This video is better known for its final scene, during which Rojas destroys a painting by Andy Warhol.[5] The series of performances put out by Rojas is accompanied by disco and soul hits, including – still another echo – a song by George Benson, *This Man's Mine*.

Over a period of ten years how have they evolved, the emotions summoned by these similar acts and documented by these artists? Why are these historical works of art reappearing at the same time in group shows? Why are these two exhibitions' common exploration of the dialectics of the home space as a place for the development of a personal identity and a collective confinement, curated by the artist Nick Mauss in Basel's Kunsthalle and the curator Anna Gritz[6] in Metz? What do they tell us about the light of contemporary body and identity politics teach us?

Ironically the art centers focused on the interior for a few weeks only before they, too, had to shut their doors due to a global pandemic. We have been confined to our houses, work remotely and be consumers online only. Has the Covid-19 epidemic come to symbolize a contemporary rereading of the crisis of representation induced by AIDS? How does one reinvent the promiscuity[7] that AIDS has saved «us», whereas we are enjoined to keep our distance?

Reparing the body

In 1978, the year Perich's video was made, New York's underground scene was beginning to feel the devastation of the disco era. The city's economy had followed the city's near bankruptcy. I am thinking of the Whit Stillman film *The Last Days of Disco*, which recreates the atmosphere from the start of the preceding decade. As far as I know, no one has ever chattered as much in a disco film as the characters in this film. The young people shown up late to the game, the film's characters, young white Ivy League graduates – the archetypes of the yuppies who were then the most affluent groups to the city's margins – were warding off their ghostliness.



The Last Days of Disco, Whit Stillman, 1998. Screen shot.

Perich's video precedes the arrival of these living-dead who cannibalized a culture and usurped urban space. Perich follows disco through the body and gesture of the Latino performer Victor Hugo Rojas and his friends. The body is a weapon, the performer slashes Warhol's painting, then runs a dildo over it. This iconoclastic final scene is complicated by the symbol of death, which is cultivated, fetishized, even embalmed in an utterly mad pharaonic vision. The mummification freezes time in a cult of death, sacrificing the carnal envelope, which is transformed into a relic.

The bohemian apartment of Perich's video gives way, ten years later, to the clinical space of a studio where Kathleen seen busily working alone. She gives herself several blows to the head, licks her own blood, ties her own legs to the legs of the madman, feels her organs, and covers herself with strips of gauze. The body is ill. «On Broadway,» the song she is heard to sing, of the superstars of the underground. White embodies and entwines both the battered body of victims and the body of the madman, and dresses wounds in a possessive relationship similar to the one Elisabeth Lebovici displays when she writes, «...we are all suffering, powerlessness, and the absurd all mix in this desperate attempt to care for her skin while making it disappear.» In this decade, mummification mirrors the act of preserving the medium of video in a desire that interweaves life, death, and death through the story and its catastrophes, and are transferred from skin to skin, male to female. They thwart identity, which is denied recognition and transhistorical promiscuity.

Storming the walls



View of the exhibition *Bizarre Silks, Private Imaginings and Narrative Facts, etc.* curated by Nick Mauss, with (foreground) Georgia Ketty La Rocca, *Comma with 3 dots*, 1970, Kunsthalle Basel, 2020. Photo: Philipp Hänger / Kunsthalle Basel.

The two shows which featured these videos explored the body's relationship to the institution according to apparently exuberant version, the subjectivities go beyond their limits and reconfigure the environment. At the entrance to the show from Ray Johnson's artist's book *Ray Gives a Party* (1955); the book is presented in a film in which we see its pages and the parade of ornamental and eccentric works to come. Using collage, Johnson illustrated the costumed attendees, scribbling guests of an imaginary party that has been shut down, as any good party should be, by a police raid.

The show is haunted by traces and clues left behind by outstanding guests. There was the PVC sculpture in the shape of a comma that might read as a French *je*, or "I," whose referent remains to be determined. On the other side, a comma followed by the letter *a* is placed with the surroundings. Bea Schlingelhoff pays homage to the activist Anne-Marie Im Hof-Piguet with the design of a font named *Imhof*, which she uses to colonized the exhibition as the font used in an accompanying leaflet and on the institution's website, where it can be seen. The sensuous, ethereal sculptures of peach and mauve veils by the 1970s American artist Rosemary Mayer call forth powerfully the names of the two women Galla Placidia with their titles, while their broad shapes elicit freer associations that range from the long pleated dress to the female genitalia in a subtle semiotic play of the particular and the general. The signature these works reference does not reconstruct the expressionist painting and its mark on the canvas. That is, disguised, fantasized, collective, or temporary, the singular identity of the people other than the artist – as in Bea Schlingelhoff's case – and each viewer is free to appropriate them.



View of the exhibition *Bizarre Silks, Private Imaginings and Narrative Facts, etc.* curated by Nick Mauss, with Rosemary Mayer, Galerie Barbara Thumm, Berlin, 2015
Photo: Philipp Hänger / Kunsthalle Basel.

The Frac Lorraine show, *The Making of Husbands, Christina Ramberg en dialogue*, took shape around a group of paintings and drawings of the American artist Christina Ramberg (1946-1995). Ramberg focused on the mechanisms that mold and standardize or singularize it. In particular, the artist used patches of uniform color in a palette of nocturnal hues to sheath and mold the body. These body-machines, the stuff of Ballardian science fiction, give off a troubling erotic imagery, which becomes dominant.



Christina Ramberg, *Tight Hipped*, 1974. © The Estate of Christina Ramberg, Courtesy of the Collection of the Madison Museum of Contemporary Art, Gift of the Chicago Imagism Collection.

The works of the other artists «in dialogue» disseminate through a series of everyday objects and technologies the qualities of the powerful Rambergian matrix. Like Alexandra Bircken's *Löwenmaul*, a dark colored wig sewn to a bra, some works conjure up a phantasmagorical and sexual vanishing point. Others, like the low gates that Ghislaine Leung has set up at the entrance to *Domestic Gates*, conjure up the idea of domestication of our earliest childhood. These gates, which have to be pushed open to enable the range of their movements in the institutional space. The variety of manifestations does have the virtue of not reducing Ramberg's work while also tending to create a catalogue effect that lightens the tension and desire haunting the pieces individually.

Contemporary catharsis

Beyond their own qualities, these two mirror exhibitions work to open a negotiation between the body and its domestication, between singular desires and social control. The strips of cloth, wigs, corsets, samples of «bizarre» 18th-century silks, and busts are as much instruments that train and mold bodies as vectors of emancipation that render them unconventional through the ways they are based on masks, disguise, constructed settings, and the heightened body reflects forms of disidentification that act on the level of the link with their creators. Ramberg's busts are devoid of a face, even gender for some. Schingelhoff's font becomes a collective text, infinitely modifiable. Identification is held in check. It all plays out in the materiality, the indexicality of bandages or toilet paper, into which the body can slip to be preserved, repaired, or transformed. The repetition of these objects like a rallying sign, a subterranean code, spanning the ages, and getting transmitted within a community. They indicate what is important and what is not, what is loaded with different affects according to the context.



View of the exhibition *The Making of Husbands, Christina Ramberg en dialogue*, curated by Anna Gritz, with Diane Simpson, *Vest – 2004*; Gaylen Gerber, *Backdrop*, 2020; Ghislaine Leung, *SHROOMS*. Frac Lorraine, 2020. Photo: Fred Dott.

This resurgence of exhibitions with queer and feminist strategies offers a counterpoint to the contemporary modes of paradox of the spectacularization of queer identity that is being essentialized, and the heroization of the self on social singularities in movement, where the binary logic of identity and identification never completely coincides. The gap is collectively.

What remains to be understood is where the institution stands vis-à-vis these processes of deterritorialization. Through relationship between identity and architecture, the institution seems to perform both its function and structure. It duplicitous dual role as site for the expression of radical subjectivities and a space of normalization. Its model would be the «soliloquizing antihero of Huysmans's novel *Against Nature* (1884) creates, places beneath a bell jar, and embalms his singular, high-spirited also echoes our contemporary lifestyles of confinement to our rooms and projection in the world of representation because through this model just beneath the surface is the figure of the dandy in which the art institution seems to recognize its detachment, however much they subvert the standards. This position continues to overlook it all, even though we are part of the social and cultural field.

Over the past few years the controversies touching on identity (for example, those involving cultural appropriation) have entered the public sphere and the growing difficulty of holding a democratic debate when each individual becomes their own only and a collectively experienced one. Cultural institutions that are supposed to play a mediating role are helpless when it comes to dealing with these issues. They do not know how to relay them other than from this position of withdrawing to the comfort of their theoretical hypotheses. They rightly reject – of a performance of supposedly authentic identities, whether it is connected with Hüttenästhetik or with the question of their race or sexual orientation. This impasse is partly due to the fact that they have been unable to integrate diversity into their mission. To devise a salutary promiscuity in a time of pandemic crisis and political demands, and to become credible with respect to the institutions they represent, they must undertake the process of examination they have been invited to by, for example, the collective called Black Lives Matter in Switzerland.

[1] See the open letter by the Black artists and cultural workers in Switzerland collective, <https://brand-new-life.org/the-black-workers-in-switzerland>

[2] Black Lives Matter, Demand Racial Data on Coronavirus, <https://blacklivesmatter.com/demand-racial-data-on-coronavirus>

[3] The Oxfam association rented it notably to house immigrants in 2017.

[4] Chad Douglas was the favorite porn actor of the writer Guillaume Dustan, who often compares his sexual performances in his novels *Dans ma chambre* (P.O.L, 1996) and *Je sors ce soir* (P.O.L., 1997).

[5] Rojas worked for Warhol at the Factory. He was also one of the models for the series of nude Polaroids in the 1980s.

[6] The show *The Making of Husbands* was first mounted at KW Berlin, where Anna Gritz was working, before travelling to the Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art of Gateshead in Northern England.

[7] Douglas Crimp, «How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic,» in: *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism*, Cambridge, 1990.

[8] Elisabeth Lebovici, *Ce que le sida m'a fait : art et activisme à la fin du XXe siècle*, JRP Ringier, Zurich, 2017.

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