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Figures of Otherness in Canadian Video

Self-representation is a well-established tradition in the history of video art and several Canadian video artists have worked with this subject in relation to figures of sexual and cultural otherness.

This text analyzes various practices that integrate the figure of the other as counterpart while exploring the self. I call this figure the video alter ego. Through the division or splitting of the self, the alter ego becomes the strange other to whom one is linked. The terminology of this word is evidence then of two poles united in the same figure: a dual and often transient figure in various areas of an identity being constructed. Continuing in the tradition of artists' self-representation, forms of self-portraiture, and otherness, the ego personifies the various characters that the artist takes on, showing a desire for the other through many versatile images.

I will begin by looking at the work of Toronto videomaker Colin Campbell. His work shows a distinct interest in the subject of identity, especially

sexual identity, as he has dealt with it repeatedly. Campbell was a pioneer artist in narrative video in Canada: along with Lisa Steele, he was one of the first to explore forms of confessional video. These are narrative instances in the first person singular, fictional autobiographies with tight framing, close ups or head and shoulder shots of the artist addressing the camera. Neutrality is shown in the camera work and in the unity of time and setting.

In many of Campbell's videos,ⁱ we find transvestite characters openly questioning issues of gender and sexual identity. Campbell does not really try to become a woman or deceive the viewer; in fact, while playing the female roles in his videos he never hides his male identity. To the contrary, his characters waver between several identity factors such as biological sex and performed gender or sexual behaviour, proposing complex figures that deliberately blur boundaries in the area of sexuality.

Because the videomaker emphasizes the disguise and artificial nature of his change from a male artist to a female character, his work proposes a reflection on the social construction of masculine/feminine categories. He carries out a veritable sexual transformation, creating a parody that criticizes the allocation of these phallogentric or even heterocentric powers. Figures of dual sexuality, Campbell's heroines are highly controversial: they question the exclusivity of the elements that classify gender.

The discussion of Campbell's work will be followed by that of a younger generation of videomakers exploring the figure of the alter ego. In the tradition of *video drag*, I will look at Stéphane St-Laurent/Minnie St-Laurent's *Stand By Your Man*, 1998, and work complementary to *drag butch* such as Cathy Sisler's *Mr. B*, 1994.

The transvestite figure will also be examined in the context of a hybrid cultural identity. Videomaker Jorge Lazano explores this issue in *Samuel and Samantha*, 1993. Here the ambiguity of sexual identity intensifies the problem of combining Latin American and Canadian cultures.

Finally, the binary oppositions of male/female and East/West are distinctly found in Karen Dew and Ed Sinclair's *Chasing the Dragon*, 1993, Paul Wong's *Miss Chinatown*, 1997, and Michel Straowanasai's *The Adventures of Iron Pussy 3*, 2000. These videomakers explore stereotypes and caricature as elements that make up identity.

The Dual Figure or the Video Alter Ego

The origin of this figure in Canadian video is probably Colin Campbell's *Janus*, 1973. Here the artist presents a sensual/sexual encounter between himself and his photographic double, stressing the narcissistic dimension of self-representation in video. *Janus* exploits the divided self and the confrontation with the other that is found later on in all the female characters the artist personifies, in his videos *The Woman From Malibu*, 1976-77, *Modern Love*, 1978-80 and *Rendez-Vous*, 1997-2000, in particular, and in his concerns about transvestism generally. The divided self in *Janus* prefigures the female character's otherness as a way for the artist to show his differing views of the world.

Dot Tuerⁱⁱ has already suggested that practices of transvestism in video, such as in Campbell's work, are evidence of a desire to be female that is similar to a desire for otherness. The representation of a transvestite figure presents an internalized view of the other sex through the partial appropriation of traits. The impersonation transforms the sexual being, making the biological sex coexist with cultural conventions recognized as belonging to the opposite sex; thus constructing a two-sided figure. This transformation reveals the social construction of the gender categories it questions through a new rendering of sex, sexuality, and desire.

The notion of the alter ego in video implies the ever-changing nature of identity constructed from sexual characteristics, as in the example given or from

other cultural elements. The two-sided figure combines subjectivity and otherness to explore the fluctuations of a constantly evolving identity.

Strongly iconoclast, the video tradition often shows subversive intentions both in the types of figures represented and in the narrative structure used. This is true of the various performing bodies in the productions examined here. Far from being naive, this inquiry about the self-image openly questions the increasingly uncertain foundations of our mutating identities.

The Tradition of Heroines in Colin Campbell's Videos

Since *The Woman From Malibu*, 1977-78,ⁱⁱⁱ Campbell has produced several models around the paradigm of the female alter ego. This includes his most recent character, Colleena, in *Rendez-Vous*, 1997-2000, who is a synthesis of the various figures the artist has personified.

Campbell's interest in issues of sexual identity originated early on as he reflected on the identity of the subject in his work. Self-representation and the use of biographical material were significant leitmotifs right from the start in works such as *True/False*, 1972, *Janus*, 1973, and *This Is An Edit -This Is Real*, 1974. *True/False* is Campbell's first confessional video. Here he makes a number of

autobiographical statements and then either confirms or denies them. The artist plays ironically on the ambiguity between reality and fiction, and he also exploits the medium's potential intimacy. The framing is a close up, full face or in profile, which increases contact with the viewer. Campbell confesses to the camera, and by extension to the viewer, a type of confessional that is reinforced by the mug-shot format of the portrait. This shows that Campbell's notion of identity at this period already implied an artificial construction. Viewers find themselves in front of a fragmented self-portrait where they must reconstruct the elements of a split personality whose foundations are continually questioned. This confessional mode is used for many of his heroine portraits: his Woman From Malibu character is presented this way most of the time. Elements that determine the female personalities are also revealed in small snatches, a phenomenon emphasised by the video's episodic nature.

In *This Is An Edit - This Is Real*, 1974, Campbell comments on notions of truth and representation, antinomy already pronounced in *True/False*. The video uses biographical material, mainly photographs inscribed with "This is an edit" or "This is real." At first, the character is represented with archival photographs, creating an endless process of reifying the character through video. The artist then places himself in front of the camera and presents different part of his anatomy in close-up while commenting intimately. These comments are always accompanied by the duality of "This is an edit" or "This is real," creating a state

of suspension. The artist draws fictional material from his wealth of experience, but the biography implies a necessarily false dimension, so that the representation can not be true. The doubly mediatized, photographic and video portrait that Campbell gives of himself is fictitious. The Colin in the video is an artificial character, a video dual that will be widely used in the future.

The notion of the video alter ego should be understood in this way because I believe it perfectly defines the tradition of heroines in Campbell's work. His exploration of the female figure goes beyond the radical exclusivity of sexual categories. The alter ego that Campbell constructs is an enigmatic figure, showing the phenomenon of wavering between male and female poles. Campbell passes in transit between identities to become multiple, without fixing completely on one or the other sex, playing at being himself and another self. The notion of the video alter ego implies this movement at the centre of identity. In Campbell's work, this phenomenon is reflected in his representation of gender as well as in his intention, which is to present both his own character and his progressive transformation into a female persona.

In the history of video art, there is great interest in the quest for identity. New technology in art production has created conditions conducive to exploring the complex nature of subjectivity and identity, and their various possibilities

within a varied framework.^{iv} Discovering the self and confronting the world through the camera has been and still is a concern of young videomakers.

The aesthetic practice of reifying the human body in video has rapidly become fertile ground for questioning traditional ways of representing the body. The significance of this phenomenon is understood also, as a way of confronting the videographic double and thus impeding the body image's fluidity. The videotext can be an indispensable tool for elaborating a subject's identity; video mediation enables the artist's psychic self to apprehend the corporal self.

Twenty-five years after Rosalind Krauss' seminal essay "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism,"^v the issue of video narcissism is as pertinent as ever and should be considered in a broader perspective. This would be an overall investigation into the self through the fascination the self-image exerts, rather than the single classical viewpoint of love for the self and a libidinal investment in one's own image.

One of the most interesting hypotheses in the psychoanalysis revision is that of according the "narcissistic conflict" (tensions and rivalry between the ego and the representation that the ego fabricates of itself) a dimension just as significant as what Freud recognized as the "Oedipus complex."^{vi} In a society controlled by a strict moral code, it is consistent to think of psychic conflicts as

the repression of desire. During the last century, great changes have occurred in our identification markers: “until then [they] had maintained control of ideals and had influenced the role these ideals played in shaping character and upholding self esteem.”^{vii} Because the self-image develops in a social context that imparts models and conventional types, this self-image inevitably evolves in this context. Is it not plausible then, to think of the loss of numerous identification markers as central to a new restlessness, which the practice of video could show?

WFM is the first female alter ego model that Campbell used to experiment with in video self-portraiture. At first glance, this woman Mildred is very different from the videomaker, sociologically at least. The artist even denied any biographical intention at first, insisting on the accidental circumstances of his performance;^{viii} however, WFM physically resembles Campbell and my intention here is to draw attention to this self-representational dimension that precisely reflects the convention of transvestism.

Generally, transvestites construct a gender image and behaviour in opposition to their biological sexual identity. A performer establishes his/her prestige through the chosen image's stature and by his/her success in impersonating this figure. This is why transvestites often choose gorgeous models from the past or still living. However, various attributes can be used in

varying ways to represent a female figure either partially or completely.

Campbell, for example, chose to impersonate an ordinary American woman whom he created by the means of contradictory facts^{ix} and hearsay in which gender categories are constantly changing.

From among the main transvestite categories that Richard Docter^x has determined and in which the ultimate objective is not transsexualism, I am retaining the following three generic types:

- Drag Queens: is a slang term referring to transvestite prostitutes that has been broadened to include transvestites generally as well as those working in the entertainment world, in a *Drag Show* for example. Some of these transvestites have had hormone therapy and are now called *hormone queens*. The term drag is not necessarily linked to a specific gender, even if it was used traditionally for male to female transvestism. The word drag effectively connotes homosexuality and at times the expression is even considered a synonym for female impersonators. Despite the homosexual connotation, many homosexuals are anxious to distinguish themselves from *drag queens* because they prefer men displaying their virility, according to Esther Newton.^{xi} "Being gay and doing drag are not the same. The relationship between homosexuality and sex-role identification is complicated."^{xii} She adds that in homosexual terms a *drag queen*

is a male homosexual dressed as a woman while a *drag butch* is a lesbian dressed as a man.

- Female Impersonators: are often but not exclusively homosexuals.

Transvestism is considered a way of life. These people are generally more comfortable in their female role but are not interested in a sex change. Often their sexual situation is linked to the entertainment world, but their life style can persist outside their work. More precisely, the female roles adopted by impersonators are often parodies, representing conventional stereotypes of femininity. It is not a matter of reproducing the behaviour of a particular woman but rather of imitating an artificial category--the feminine--as if this could be presented a homogeneous manner. "Femininity can only be acted by a man."^{xiii} This category is culturally produced and reflects its production context; therefore, North American female impersonators turn to symbols specific to our culture.

- She-males: are transvestites who openly present the attributes of both sexes as the name indicates. This type of overtly ambiguous transvestism stresses the uncertainty of sexual categories by making conventional types normally thought of as exclusive coexist.

Throughout his performances, Campbell keeps his pronounced male anatomical characteristics such as his voice, apparent hairiness, and absence of breasts thus presenting himself as a she-male: the transvestite figure most openly exploiting the subversive representation of gender identity because it combines both the male and female nature.

Campbell's image remains an outstanding vocal image throughout Mildred's actual performance: her main action being to recount her life. This Mildred character contains all the alter ego forms that will recur in his work: a she-male retaining elements common to Campbell the subject;^{xiv} female appropriations of cultural markers; confessional style video; splitting the displayed self by the means of transvestism.^{xv}

This last element is important because it magnifies the apparent splitting in two of the video alter ego. Campbell is not content to just explore another feminized aspect of his personality, he also comments on the actual process of transvestism. This he carries out by creating distance and reflectivity through the specular effect of verbal language. This process intensifies the first splitting of the self already present in the alter ego.

With the reduplication of the double, viewers find themselves in front of two complementary, but antinomic worlds where the artist wavers between two

positions. Sometimes he is Mildred and other times he is Colin becoming Mildred. The issue here is again a transitory structure: the various representational scenes waver between the artist's two images, sometimes favouring the character and other times the figure of the actor, disrupting the coherence of the diegetic fiction.

When we consider the male/female duality in the power relations of these various practices, the male is usually presented as the controlling entity, occupying a superior hierarchical position. Esther Newton points out that this hierarchical privilege is in fact relatively delicate regarding the given image of masculinity, in which a single female element succeeds in unbalancing the character's male identity. In the case of Robin,^{xvi} the second heroine Campbell impersonated, the fact of wearing male clothing does not in the least challenge the character's female identity because it is well established by the hair, body movements, and accessories.

From the general categories of female impersonators, subcategories appear such as *street*, *stage*,^{xvii} *drag*, even and *camp*. The *drag impersonator* subcategory indicates the general change from one sex to the other, usually from male to female. The *camp impersonator* subcategory works in the same way but is more exploitative of the incongruities in the character's presentation, having an affected or show-off nature for example.

Drag and *camp* impersonators play on the theatricality of their roles, emphasizing the artificiality of their characters and in this way they manage to create distance.^{xviii} The impersonation or definition of a character is made by constructing an appearance contrary to the basic biological facts. The nature of gender is cultural.

Female impersonators use parody in their practice of transvestism; they exploit the boundaries between the male and female poles and at the same time draw attention to the artificial dimension created by gender categories that appear free of sexual determinism. In this sense, these propositions are meant to oppose legitimate sexual codes. This is even more flagrant in the “she-male” who presents very pronounced gender markers of both sexes. The she-male does not attempt to conceal his biological male attributes such as a beard, chest hair, and of course a penis. In addition to this, he usually wears flamboyant embellishments that are conventionally female such as makeup, accessories, and clothes. The she-male openly manipulates sexual codes and presents himself as a subversive figure.

Unlike female impersonators, the she-male does not conceal the masculine nature of his biological sex in order to reveal it in a shocking manner at the end of his performance. The male sex is displayed right from the start. The she-male

exploits the incongruity between cultural gender markers and anatomical sex. He plays with his dual identity.

The figure of the she-male typifies the phenomenon of wavering between genders very well. This process can be extended beyond appearances and also be used in the sphere of identity generally. Referring to the tradition of transvestism in video, Chris Straayer^{xix} refined the category of she-male and proposed the notion of the she-man, reinforcing the power dimension given to the combined figure when male anatomy is presented as sexual authority. The she-man has completely subordinated his female elements to his male power. This is in contrast to an emasculated dimension that could remain in the she-male figure.

In broader popular culture, the she-man is a new figure, markedly bisexual rather than androgynous,^{xx} in which the performer completely integrates the attributes of the female sex and sexuality. The she-man is not effeminate; both heterosexual and homosexual artists can impersonate him. The she-man's specificity is the great sexual potential and strength attached to his image.

These powerful new subversive figures have appeared mainly in experimental film and video art productions. Staayer refers to the aesthetics of

narcissism and video's tradition of intimacy to explain this phenomenon. Since its beginning, the video medium has been a favoured means for exploring identity while proposing a discourse counter to leading media tendencies thus exploiting the medium's subversive potential. Many themes show concern for indefinable, indistinct boundaries, and paradoxical representations. The figure of the she-man can be understood then as a symbol of this iconoclast tradition in video.

In Campbell's work, transvestism is always evident. The WFM character is never presented as a *drag queen*, he does not play with deception, and at times has characteristics belonging to both sexes: female accessories and posture, male hairiness and voice timbre. In this sense, I think the character is much closer to the *she-male* type because the sexual power and potential attributed to the *she-man* is lacking. Actually, WFM's sexual dimension is diminished through the ambiguity of gender identity.

I mentioned above that Mildred's physical appearance is similar to Colin's and as if through gender interference, the artist's male nature persists through his voice and body. Similar to the she-male and even to the she-man who precisely exploits the male body's erotic potential, the body's maleness is not denied. The male body remains present and is not made dependent on a gender's cultural features. Campbell exists as himself, actively experiencing life

and by extension gender. And this is where the richness of his representation is found. The male body is considered neither a passive tool nor easily malleable material. Its uncontrollable presence creates a gap in the representation's plausibility.

Campbell has impersonated three other female characters: Robin, Anna and Colleena^{xxi} are all based on the same kind of travesty as WFM. He has never impersonated a true drag queen character. His various representations are never plausible. The artist always stresses his anatomical male traits such as his male voice, hairiness, and his lack of breasts, which are present to distance the cultural conventions he resorts to such as clothing and accessories.

A retrospective look enables us to observe a development in Campbell's female images. His first heroine Mildred, the WFM, is a middle class American woman with an unstable psychological nature: she is a character that is culturally very different from the artist. Robin and Anna represent transitional models, female figures gradually developing and becoming freer, opening up through their professional activities and breaking new ground with their amorous experiences. The last character, Colleena, is overtly a female alter ego; she is widely biographical and directly inspired by Campbell's lifestyle.

This leads to Campbell's work on identity and the effect of reality in his work. Since the first video art productions, artists have questioned the supposed transparency of television. Many of these artists have openly criticized television's ideologies from its editorial objectivity to its production that depends on commercials and viewer ratings. Campbell's work lies within this logic, he plays with irony, setting up a distance to verisimilitude and engaging firmly in the constructed dimension of video discourse. The camera does not lie in that what the viewers see is false. One of Campbell's intentions is precisely to question the video medium's capacity to transmit an objective reality. At least, he seems to constantly create a gap in the representational illusion or the effect of reality, particularly through the representation and subversion of gender categories.

Displaying the Process of Transvestism

Following this logic, videomaker Jorge Lazano in *Samuel and Samantha*, 1993, applies the process of transvestism in the same manner as Campbell. This video relies on the performance of a character with a split personality: Samuel Lopez is a student and Salvadorian political refugee and his alter ego, Samantha Trench, is a transvestite and stage performer. The first sequences show Samuel telling his story about his problems due to his homosexual condition, his

difficulties in reconciling his Canadian and Latin-American identities, and his break with his father. This is presented in the confessional mode that Campbell and Steele developed.

Throughout his account, Samuel applies makeup and progressively becomes Samantha, all while keeping the masculine tone of his voice. His performance seems very natural. On the other hand, the female is constructed in contradictory factual and verbal ways: the story remains Samuel's with Samuel's voice interrupting images of Samantha at shows and parties.

One of the video medium's strengths is its denotative power. The images and the voice, worked here in the confessional tradition, amplify the representation's narrative impact. Again due to the confessional mode, the artist's narrative, both as Samuel and as Samantha, has the effect of being very sincere. What the camera records seems true because video like film has a naturalizing effect. But in fact, what the camera records is more a fashionable naturalization of the dominant ideology.^{xxii}

As is the case for WFM, viewers are confronted by the character's paradoxical dual nature that wavers between these two identities without ever completely settling on a specific sex or identity. The play of irony regarding the image's plausibility remains striking, and the classic documentary strategy is

increased twofold by this constructed character's artificiality. This is a reduplication of the splitting and a strategy of caesura. Samuel/Samantha is presented as a transitory being with several sexual and cultural identities. The split in the character's life is backed up by a semiotic break; a gap in the representational illusion or effect of reality is created by strong distancing elements such as the very process of transvestism.

Like the transvestite body, the enunciative stance is bipolar, wavering between male and female without completely abandoning traces of otherness, again taking the place of the video alter ego. In this context the transvestite figure is polemic. The transvestite refuses to obey conventional sexual norms. The transgression enables us to reconsider these norms and as Judith Butler has stated about the film *Paris is Burning*, "a distance will be opened up between that hegemonic call to normativizing gender and its critical appropriation."^{xxiii}

In his videos, Campbell focuses on critically appropriating gender norms through the free circulation of artifice. Like for Lazano, the voice is the representation's main dissonant factor. Mildred's voice is the narrator Campbell's voice, the only one not disguised. Mildred's voice is already an interpretation, which deconstructs the camera's representation and in a sense contradicts the denotation. The voice emphasizes that it is not a woman speaking. There can not be a straight denotation because immediate

identification poses a problem. Because this is puzzling, viewers must go beyond the medium's reality effect and recognize what is wrong. Through dissonance, the voice becomes a crucial interpretative factor.

The Strange Other to Whom I Am Linked

Another confessional video with a dual figure is Stefan St-Laurent/Minnie St-Laurent's *Stand By Your Man*, 1998. All the characteristics of the confessional video are respected here using minimal staging. In his apartment, a male transvestite street impersonator, Stefan/Minnie is lip-syncing a song by Tammy Wynette, the singer he is trying to be. It is mainly the singer's voice that is heard, although the actor's voice gives a couple of short commentaries on his performance, which acts as a distancing element.

The performer repeats his performance several times in a temporal loop that becomes disturbing. As well as the very unkempt-looking female image that he displays along with significant male anatomical traits such as a penis and a flat chest, the character wears a denture that hampers his speech.

Stefan/Minnie's scrawniness, neglected look, and denture all contribute to eliminating any eroticism or desirability the transvestite figure might have. The

compulsive repetition of the sequences accentuates the parody and even the pathetic aspect of transvestism.

Cathy Sisler presented the rarer female *drag butch* character in *Mr B*. Mr B does not speak and wanders anonymously around the city. The relatively normal male types that Sisler resorts to are concerned as much with accessories--a hat and a large overcoat to disguise her body--as with behaviour--spitting and smoking. Few anatomical traits are exploited; the character simply has her hair cut very short and scratches her cheek as if her beard is itching.

It is evident that when we try to distinguish what belongs to the male universe and what is part of the female world, using stereotypes becomes inevitable. And stereotypes are much more pronounced when they concern a gender's cultural markers that are extremely conventional, as we have seen in the chosen examples. However, this is a sensitive issue and can be tricky because some elements typically belonging to one gender category can slip into the universe of the other through fashion, earrings and ties for example. The use of these types is nevertheless inevitable when defining characters and I consider them here as a gender's social conventions and not as essentialist characteristics.

To make her character more convincingly male, Sisler constructs an identity by exploiting several cultural stereotypes: she creates a male gender

fiction, mixing together pornography, Bogart, *GQ*, and *Modern Bride*. Category takes precedence over the individual and type dominates the personality. Mr B. is one *man* among many in the urban mass. Here, the ego is diluted through an increased number of alter egos. These men merge into a prototype that is homogenous at first glance: they wear similar clothes and adopt the same posture. Only a few surprised looks that Mr B. receives remind us of the character's ontologically female nature, which is difficult to identify with not so much because of her masculine look but because of her lack of individuality.

Parody of the Sexes

I will end on the aspects of parody and caricature used often in many of these performance videos. As I have already mentioned, Karen Dew and Ed Sinclair's *Chasing the Dragon*, Paul Wong's *Miss Chinatown*, and even Michael Straowanasai's *The Adventures of Iron Pussy 3* employ stereotypes and caricature to shape the identities of their represented characters.

Chasing the Dragon openly questions notions of exoticism. On one hand there is Cherry, a female impersonation of the typical Asian sexual stereotype, a gentle and submissive curvaceous beauty, and on the other, the representation of a fantasy, the stereotype of an Asian woman created through erotic conversations at 1-900-NUMBER. The videomakers are following along the lines

of *This Is An Edit - This Is Real* and are indicating the video image's artificial dimension, which is just as artificial as their image of the Asian woman. They present a fantasy rather than a character because in the end Cherry is only an empty form of female otherness, a form that the user reconstructs through projections. A twofold category that is both cultural and sexual, Kew and Sinclair stress that an Asian woman in pornography represents exoticism for a Western man.

Similar intentions are found in *Miss Chinatown*. As the work's title indicates, stress is put on the artificiality of racial identity and the sham of beauty contests and transvestite galas, which are criticized, deconstructed, and re-evaluated from several testimonies superimposed as cacophonous interview accounts. Cultural, racial, and sexual identities are placed on the same level, all just as fabricated the one as the other. Composite identities are transformed through their borrowings, contrasting in this way with the ideal of a standardized, stable identity.

A genuine cartoon video, *The Adventures of Iron Pussy*^{3xxiv} uses caricature to represent characters, to recount the story, and to construct the video. The action takes place in Bangkok^{xxv} with Iron Pussy wearing all the conventional flamboyant paraphernalia of a transvestite such as a wig, pink stockings, and red high-heel shoes. Here, homosexuals are represented as shaved and muscular

with tattoos and go-go boys are young nymphets. The acting is exaggerated and nothing escapes the biting humour of this Kung-fu melodrama that borders on the burlesque.

It is through the characters' sexual masquerades, the use of irony, and commentary on the medium's reality that we can understand the intended parody in the productions analysed. In most cases, the artists have set up an important system of distancing through varying voices: the representations stress the artificiality of the gender identities, the presentations, and the characters' performances. In this sense, parody is a typical element in video representations of the alter ego.

As Linda Hutcheon says,^{xxvi} parody is a form of imitation involving a crucial ironic distance. It is a "transcontextualization," a repetition with differences and does not necessarily entail a dimension that ridicules the referent parody; this is what distinguishes it from burlesque. Parody does not destroy its subject: it reinterprets it in a way that is sometimes critical and subversive and at other times more conservative.

Parody implies the transgression of an organized and acknowledged structure, a legitimate referent, which through this process becomes denaturalized and transcontextualized. By highlighting and transgressing this

legitimized form, parody creates a critical distance. This aspect is particularly significant when one thinks about the subversive impact that parodying gender has for the transvestite exploiting the figure of the alter ego.

In the case of transvestism, the referent here is not necessarily another undertaking but more a series of legitimate types that serve to define genders. For the transvestite, the parodied referent is a naturalized common code, that is to say, artifice or acquired behaviour presented as conditioned by sex and by extension nature. The transvestite's parody questions the supposed naturalness of sexual categories, indicating both the constructed dimensions of these categories and the naturalizing context in which they are often presented.

The parody in transvestism is directed at the proposition's content--the category--but it also criticizes the propositional form--the naturalizing context. This is its great subversive power. Understood in this way, the video alter ego's dual figures thwart our basic cognitive schema of exclusive classifications, proposing an aesthetic blending of the sexes that is still difficult to define.

Translation by Janet Logan

Notes

i. Campbell impersonated female characters mainly in the series of five videos about *The Woman From Malibu*, 1976-77, in the two tapes *Modern Love*, 1979, and *Bad Girls*, 1980, in *Dangling By Their Mouths*, 1981, and most recently in *Rendez-vous*, 1997, *Deja Vu*, 1998 and *Dishevelled Destiny*, 2000.

ii. Dot Tuer, "Video in Drag: Trans-sexing the Feminine," *Parallelogramme* 12, no. 3, (February-March 1987): 24-29.

iii. These are *The Woman From Malibu*, *The Temperature in Lima*, *Culver City Limits* and *Last Seen Wearing, Hollywood and Vine*. The character in *The Woman From Malibu* is referred to here as WFM.

iv. The themes of intimacy, introspection, and subjectivity have been abundantly treated most notably in the seventies and eighties. An outstanding example of this is Kate Craig's *Delicate Issue* (1979, 12 min.). This is a video portrait of the artist in which the camera takes a voyeuristic point of view.

v. *October 1*, (Spring 1976): 51-64.

vi. See Jean-Claude Stoloff, *Interpréter le narcissisme*, Paris: Dunod, 2000. The author examines the pertinence of this slippage in the context of current psychoanalysis, which is no longer exclusively preoccupied with Freud's *guilty subject*, a prisoner of conflicts between drives and taboos. Psychoanalysis today is also interested in the *tragic subject* engrossed in an existential malaise and problems of fulfilment and self-image.

vii. Stoloff, p. XII.

viii. In an interview I had with Campbell, he said he impersonated the heroine per chance because he did not have enough money to engage an actress.

ix. Resorting to a gender's cultural markers such as makeup, clothing, and accessories recognized as female.

x. Richard F. Doctor, *Transvestites and Transsexuals: Towards a Theory of Cross-Gender behavior* (New York and London: Plenum Press, 1988).

xi. Esther Newton, *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1972), 3.

xii. Newton, 34.

xiii. Jan Kott, *The Theater of Essence* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1984), 124. Quoted by Alisa Salomon, "It's Never Too Late To Switch: Crossing Toward Power" in Lesley Ferris, ed. *Crossing The Stage: Controversies on Cross-Dressing* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 145. Salomon also notes that caricatured behaviour is seldom found in women personifying men: they attempt to imitate male gender rather than parody it.

xiv. These elements can range from anatomical markers to homonyms.

xv. The videos *The Temperature in Lima* and *Hollywood and Vine* present explicit sequences of transvestism. The viewer is confronted by the paradoxical dual nature of the character Campbell impersonates, both Campbell himself and Campbell progressively becoming WFM.

xvi. Robin is the heroine in *Modern Love*, 1979 and *Bad Girls*, 1980.

xvii. Contrary to street impersonators, stage impersonators really perform their numbers in a show.

xviii. Newton, 104-107. She adds that the category "camp" first designates the incongruous relationship between the elements, it can be applied to the duality of gender's out-of-context elements, but still imply a high level of artificiality. A link can be made with the more current term "queer." "Queer . . . means to fuck with gender It concerns "gender fuck," which is a full-frontal theoretical and practical attack on the dimorphism of gender- and sex-roles . . ." see Stephen Whittle "Gender Fucking or Fucking Gender?" in Richard Ekins and David King, eds. *Blending Genders: Social Aspects of Cross-Dressing and Sex-Changing* (New York and London: Routledge, 1996), 202.

xix. Chris Straayer, *Deviant Eyes, Deviant Bodies: Sexual Re-orientations in Film and Video* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

xx. The term androgyny involves a connotation of sexual absence and is rarely used for a highly sexed individual. The term bisexual, which overtly implies sexual activity, seems to me more appropriate. Marjorie Garber adds to this subject: ". . . androgyny as a metaphor. A metaphor . . . consists of two parts: the work being used figuratively (the vehicle) and the idea that it is meant to convey (the tenor). Androgyny is sexy when it is the vehicle (the physical form of performance we see) and not sexy when it is the tenor (the idea or the idealization). When the performance is androgynous, it is frequently erotic; and its eroticism is often bisexual, appealing both to men and to women." . . . "When 'androgyny' was not the vehicle of a metaphor but its tenor, however--when it denoted something like 'wholeness' or 'integration' of personality--it was determinedly unsexy. It meant, or is said to mean, or was said *only* to mean, stasis, not movement, and union, not desire. In other words, not lack but fullness," in *Vice Versa: Bisexuality and the Eroticism of Everyday Life* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 233-234.

xxi. Anna is the character in *Dangling By Their Mouths*, 1981 and Colleena is the heroine in *Rendez-vous*, 1997-2000.

xxii. Concerning this see Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).

xxiii. Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 137.

xxiv. A series of three videos.

xxv. A reconstruction of Bangkok, showing a Western vision of the East.

xxvi. Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms* (New York and London: Methuen, 1985).

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