



When what divides us, unites us.

By Kong Yen Lin

"The spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images." - Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967)

"I".

There perhaps could never be any spoken or written expression that can rival the simplicity of this singular word, and the enormity it entails. For every expression that starts with this word -I say, I think, I believe, etc – comes tied with an awareness and assertion of individual identity and presence. Practitioners of visual culture, on the other hand, have ceaselessly attempted to explore, pursue and dissect the concept of the self. Their "I" is never static, it metamorphizes with time. And in our time, the post modern condition is characterized by a search for the self -a pursuit never more so desperate and earnest, a search liberated, expedited, then ruthlessly shackled, persecuted all at once by the onslaught of technological development. If the 1990s have been dominated by the rallying cry of nationalistic unity, then the "I-culture" is its by-product of the first decade at the turn of the millennium. Ironically, as technology connects the dots of humanity, it simultaneously separates and demarcates the individual's identity and voice. The Arab Spring is a case in point. Aided by technology and the mass media, individuals have all made their mark as pivotal characters to the global plot.

The assertion of the self –one's inner states and consciousness- comes across strongly in this year's submissions to the Brighton Photo Fringe Open'11. Over 400 exciting works, 20 nationalities, countless cultural backgrounds and experiences, each constituting a thread in this tapestry about the human condition. The three works I would be discussing in this essay are incredibly intimate portrayals of personal identity, but as one takes a voyage into these realms of individual consciousness, one ultimately realizes these are reflections of universal sentiments: the paradoxical co-existence of pain, pleasure, the rebellion against power and domination, and the yearning for love balanced precariously against feelings of vulnerability and internal instability. Contemporary photography represents communities where one's sense of self emerges, in our frameworks of family, friends, civic society, visual media. The submissions to the 2011 Open are unique voices carrying messages about the human condition and the connections that link all life in this world.

From all to none: Exploring the meaning of "I" in family

I recall a rhetorical question the protagonist in television drama threw up in dialogue : "What does the word "F.A.M.I.L.Y" stand for? "



Figure 1 Macro vs micro: Unlike Phillip Toledano's *Days with my Father* (below) which focuses more on a specific set of father-son dynamics, Lydia Goldblatt is more concerned with probing physical and psychological thresholds of a human essence and contemplating a universal sense of life.

"Father And Mother I Love You. "

Without delving into the sociological accuracy of this expression, it is on the most superficial of levels a catchy and brilliant abbreviation. And it is with love that Lydia Goldblatt, tenderly places the intimate domain of her parents under the microscopic vision of her camera. Twisting and turning the dials gently as she zooms in, withdraws, refocuses, Goldblatt works with the precision of a scientist powered by the desire to probe, examine and discover perhaps the greatest mystery in this world – herself. In her series *All Flesh Is*, Goldblatt launches a contemplative inquiry into the processes that shape our experience of life, mortality and the invisible bonds of love as she documents the final days of her father's life. One reflexively recalls Phillip Toledano's photographic project *Days with My Father*¹, where he documented the final days of his ageing father stricken with memory loss. Despite the similarities in subject matter, Toledano and Goldblatt take on vastly different approaches and processes. While Toledano concentrates more

on memories and personal histories (his father's recollections of his youth), Goldblatt uses her family more as a stepping - off point for exploring her wider concerns and musings about human existence. At the core of her work is an examination of the subtle processes of erasure that returns us to the state from which we emerge. Just like life itself, there are surprises at every turn. Stepping into her frames is like leaning against the door of a locked chamber peeking into the keyhole, but just as the viewer satisfies his voyeurism from a safe distance, the door flings open unexpectedly

and he is confronted – somewhat uncomfortably - with none other than mortality itself. Dominating each photographic space is an evocation of the fragility and indefinable boundaries that demarcate our individual existence. Yet, in her work we see not only tenderness and a lingering sadness, but also doubt. Questions about who are we, where do we come from, where do we go, are abound. Just like the whisper of lip imprint that Goldblatt's father leaves on the napkin, the work seems to be held lightly afloat on a thin, faltering last breath. And as one exhales, one finds at the end of the story a solemnizing realization of the heart rendering solitude

that permeates every individual's existence from cradle to grave.

Construction and deconstruction: Seeking one's place on life's stage

The desire to record one's fleeting existence in this world is intensified as one transits from Goldblatt's tender imagery to the frenetic, sometimes melancholic inner worlds of Corinna Streitz. In her project *Gossamer*, Streitz presents staged photography serving as autobiographical accounts of her life and identity. Weaving narrative into reality, her images play with the

¹ Phillip Toledano: *Days With My Father*. Retrieved from <http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/gallery/2010/may/16/days-with-my-father#/?picture=362646588&index=0> on October 29, 2011.

conventions of the typical self portraiture, leaning towards a more spontaneous and emotionally charged expression. Locations and accessories featured are all connected to her life experiences and childhood memories. Pregnant with nostalgia and a sense of enigmatic expectation, these elements come together to constitute visceral psychological and emotional self portraits. It is hard not to emerge from these images without one's senses assaulted by the combination of painful solitude, fierce intimacy and bewildering mysteriousness, but Streitz makes no apologies about the disorienting impact of her vision – that is in essence, her and her life.

Libidinal consciousness: navigating cross currents of pain and pleasure

Even more fascinated with life's oscillation between emotional extremities is Liana Yang, who takes the



Figure 3 Pain or Pleasure?: In *The Epiphany of States*, Liana Yang questions the ambivalence in how emotions are expressed, and leaves the viewer to decide.

exploration of pain and joy into the realms of mass media and pornography in her work. We see differences between Streitz's and Yang's endeavors.

While the former is an utmost embodiment of emotional attachment and personal investment, the latter chooses to take its place at the opposite end of the spectrum with an aesthetic of detachment. In *The Epiphany of States [TEoS]*, Yang surveys with a somewhat ironic and distanced eye, anonymous young men of various ethnic backgrounds caught on camera while engaged in acts of passion. At the core of her work is an investigation into the profound relationship between pain and pleasure and how such boundaries blur between these seemingly contrasting emotions. Her curiosity about the visual ambiguity between the expressions of pleasure and pain is fueled by news media and also pornography. In her own words, "Both pain and pleasure are both opposite, yet related. Many cultures have always been on this constant quest to elicit pleasure, and mostly by inducing extreme pain in effect to attain heightened states of ecstasy. Hence, is it coincidental that both these emotions look almost identical?" Yang feels this congruence, in some ways also compels us to rethink how we view and read an image. Should we always believe what we see? Pornography offered this artist a potent visual language of voyeurism, hedonism and the vulnerability of sexual exposure, suitable for appropriating. Working like an archivist, she selects images of men in heightened states of pleasure in pornographic videos and takes screenshots. In so doing, she effectively subsumes the medium of video into photography, freezing

these decisive moments and immortalizing them. She takes a further step and crops her subjects tightly, consequently purging the frames of any contextual elements, and then invites the viewer to confront these men, now transformed into objects of desire to be collected and consumed, within these tight claustrophobic photographic spaces. Significantly, Yang's choice of the male nude embodies a tongue-in-cheek subversion of the conventional portrayal of women as passive objects of eroticism and desire. John Berger, in his analysis of the female nude in traditional Renaissance paintings, points out that the key protagonist in art has



Figure 2 *In Limbo*: The fact that Corinna Streitz's autobiographical images are staged confers a kind of "frozen" status to these images, binding them to a specific time and context. As such, her narratives, despite being rooted in true experiences, can never develop into full narratives. This brings forth a sense of unresolved tension and enigma.

always been presumed to be male by default, with every element in the painting addressing and reaffirming his presence and superiority as a spectator-owner, and,²“it is for him that the figures have assumed their nudity.” Even if men were to be subject matters in art, they were portrayed with heroism and poise, reinforcing cultural perceptions of masculinity and power. Hence when Yang portrays her men as such, she has not only reversed the direction of the gaze, with the spectator now being female, but also ironically strips her male subjects of their dominance. By reworking gender hierarchies, the work not only triggers a kind of gender consciousness and re-examination of self identity, but also provokes concepts about the role of an artist as not just a creator, but mediator and spectator as well.

Re-reading history: Surveying feminism and gender through a personal lens

The exploration of gender inequality and hierarchies takes center stage in EJ Major’s series of works: *Venus Vanitas*, *Seriously Damaged by Attack*, *Self Portrait with Slasher Mary*. Driven by questions about how identity is constructed by a vast lexicon of symbolic signs and signals, Major adopts a photographic practice rooted in performance and a reconstruction to provoke fresh thought about the changing self from past to present. The three works are created out of her interest in the concept of protest, which she feels serves as a platform for exploring the myriad of ongoing causes that unceasingly vie for our attention and action. Her inspiration stems from an



Figure 4 Inside-Out: The viewer standing before EJ Major’s works is conferred an outsider status, where they subconsciously begin a process of defining their modern selves in relation to “the other”, and history on the whole.

urgency, ambivalence and anxiety to make sense of things amidst the onslaught of information generated to raise awareness in us towards various issues. The 20th century suffragette movement in Britain is of particular interest to Major, and she creates photo narratives, part reconstructions and part composites, based on significant historical events and iconic characters in this period. Linked by their historical reference, the three works draw inspiration from the vandalism of Velázquez’s *Rokeby Venus* in London’s National Gallery, on 10th March 1914, by militant suffragette Mary Richardson. Richardson, who entered the gallery with an axe concealed inside her jacket sleeve and held in place by a chain of safety pins, rained seven blows onto the

painting before she was subdued by security personnel. The arson, which Richardson claimed was intended to draw attention to the plight of Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) leader Emmeline Pankhurst, who was then on hunger strike in Holloway Prison, landed her an 18-month sentence for hard labour. Richardson later issued a statement to the WSPU explaining her actions: “I have tried to destroy the picture of the most beautiful woman in mythological history as a protest against the government for destroying Mrs Pankhurst, who is the most beautiful character in modern history.”³ In *Venus Vanitas*, Major poses as Venus and Cupid on satin cloth bearing the colours of the suffragette flag (purple, white, green), while holding a reflection of her mother in between both characters. Juxtaposing Venus – a metaphor of idealized purity and beauty -with her ageing mother, the photo is a commentary on the rigid standards of beauty imposed on women in society. The work also evokes a kind of inescapability towards the inevitable – as much as one yearns for eternal youth, one ultimately submits to the rituals of life – ageing, sickness and death. Subsequently, *Seriously Damaged by Attack* shows a suspended moment, of Major role playing as Richardson standing before the actual *Rokeby Venus* masterpiece armed with an axe. Lastly, Major takes a stab at reaching a conclusion with *Self Portrait with Slasher Mary*, where she

² Berger, John. (1972). *Ways of Seeing*, pp.54. London: British Broadcasting Corporation.

³ History Learning Site: The Role of Women 1900 to 1945 -Mary Richardson. Retrieved from http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/mary_richardson.htm on November 19, 2011.

combines several elements: A mysterious figure tangled within the white satin of an unfurling suffragette flag, with only her hands protruding above her head holding a shutter release as she stands before a slashed black and white news image of the damaged masterpiece and a framed portrait of Richardson. The off-centre composition and space on the left seems to be drawing viewers into the vantage point of Richardson where she previously stood before slashing the artwork, inviting them to scrutinize history on a photographic tableau. Read together, the works seem engaged in conversation with each other, a visual dialogue that draws upon symbols and icons in artistic tradition and social memories to reflect upon personal identity and the modern condition at large. By reenacting the attack of a classical artwork on the photographic medium, Major not only immortalizes the act but also unintentionally perhaps, provokes subtle associations and thoughts about how the feminist movement has evolved over the decades alongside technological innovations (i.e. the advent and rising popularity of photography). Interesting similarities exist between Streitz and Major's works, but unlike Streitz, who uses staged photography as biographical and anecdotal references to her personal memories, Major utilizes her photographic constructions as an intellectual bridge between historical, social and moral issues and the individual.

Concluding Reflections: Our place in this social spectacle

Lydia Goldblatt's probes the most basic unit of society –the family and kinship ties- which informs, nurtures and sustains our individual existence. Her photographic vision comes across as subtle and unobtrusive initially but eventually gets hair-raising, literally and figuratively, as we journey into the private space of her father that is fraught with notions of mortality and the frailty of life. Corinna Streitz combines documentary truth with staged narratives to awaken a desire in us to recollect and reclaim our own history and relive the most genuine of feelings and experiences. And as though building up to a visual climax, Liana Yang's work featuring appropriated frames of various nameless men in the act of passion, offers an unexpected connection with Streitz and Goldblatt and their lexicon of profound human experience. EJ Major's photo collages attempt to awaken a new consciousness on one's personal convictions and beliefs by re-presenting both artistic and social history with a twist. The viewer standing beyond her works are conferred an outsider status, where they subconsciously begin a process of defining themselves in relation to "the other", be it Mary Richardson, the feminist movement, or very simply, to the past. Tying all four photographers' works together is their exploration of the universal strand of identity – the lack of it, the search for it, the questioning of it, and the redefinition of it. The recurring underlying question seems to be: What is the postmodern identity and how is such an entity portrayed in contemporary photography? Zygmunt Bauman proposed that identity has always been problematic. If the modern struggle for identity was to construct one and keep it stable, post modern's fixation on identity was to destabilize it and keep options as open as possible. Hence he alludes postmodern life to a pilgrimage, a journey of "building up", and puts forth metaphors of the stroller, tourist, vagabond and player to describe the various strategies of life adopted by different individuals to navigate such ambivalent times⁴. The works discussed in this essay in some ways possess fragments of Bauman's proposed post modern personas, but more crucially, the nature of their conception all signify some kind of fluidity, open-endedness and work -in-progress-ness that reflects the spirit, energy and state of flux that contemporary photography exists within.

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⁴ Hall, Stuart and Du Gay, Paul. (1996). Questions of cultural identity: From Pilgrim to Tourist – or a Short History of Identity by Zygmunt Bauman. Pp. 26. Sage Publications.