

project, as is evidenced by the entreaty accompanying their Manifesto Number 2 *Come to DADA*. They have become the willing and sometimes indispensable accomplices to millions of us in fetishisation and nuancing of our identity. Mambo's products have an anxious love of surface, and slyly "We observe a charging of the contents and aestheticising of even the most profane, basic products, which results in the fact that even the purchase of the most every day articles becomes a wistful act of personal self-definition."¹⁰ Or perhaps it's not so draconian because I have a T-shirt that says "More a Pair of Shorts Than a Way of Life".

Rafael von Uslar claims in his essay *Incidents of Friendly Fire* that "The decision of who remembers and who decides on behalf of the contents of collective memory and consciousness is very much a question of strategy for interest groups."¹¹ Gender and culture are both constructions that articulate themselves by resort to signifiers. One possible reading of the process of (post)colonisation is to view it as an act of brutal compulsory dragging. Anyone, who wilfully makes a representation or performance of another, *drags*. It does not make any difference if we are talking about gender, architecture or art. The New World and parts of the Old, like India were forced into lip-syncing established depictions of culture based on European and more recently American models. Oddly though, when one talks about "drag" and those who employ it as a strategy in their work most people hear the word "queer", and recoil, bums to the wall. However, at a time when peripheral cultures are searching as we are in *Parthenogenesis*, for an antidote to the more toxic effects of impulsive mono-culturalism, we should bear in mind that the performance of gender has attained some influence over the modalities of representation available to the biological model. Drag is a powerful strategy because it affects by its constant redefinition the archetypes that shape the way we see and understand things. "Does it hurt? she asked suddenly. "What?" "The Chance. Is it painful, or is it like they say?" "It makes you vomit a lot, and feel ill, but it doesn't hurt. It's more like a difficult time for your head."¹²

Gary Carsley



Mambo *Study for Philistine's Monster* 2003 courtesy Mambo, Sydney

- ¹ Peter Carey, *Collected Stories*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1994 p. 273
- ² Max Hollein, *Shopping – A Century of Art and Consumer Culture*, Hatje Cantz Publishers, 2002 p. 13
- ³ *Outrageous*, written and directed by Richard Benner, Film Consortium of Canada Inc. Toronto 1977
- ⁴ George Alexander, *Artlink*, vol 22 number 1 p. 29
- ⁵ Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked*, Routledge, London, 1993 p. 99
- ⁶ Kerry Brougher, *Art and Film Since 1945: Hall of Mirrors*, Monacelli Press, New York 1996 p. 13
- ⁷ Sergi Tretyakov, *John Heartfield*, OGIS, Moscow, 1936 Page 72
- ⁸ Cary S. Leibowitz, *Catalogue Prospect 93*, Frankfurter Kunstverein, Frankfurt, 20/3-23/5 2003 p. 135
- ⁹ Rafael von Uslar, Email correspondence between the author and Gary Carsley, 2003
- ¹⁰ Max Hollein, *Shopping – A Century of Art and Consumer Culture*, Hatje Cantz Publishers, 2002 p.14
- ¹¹ Rafael von Uslar, *Incidents of Friendly Fire*, Catalogue accompanying "The Memorial Project", Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney, 1997
- ¹² Peter Carey, *Collected Stories*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1994 p. 281



Cary S. Leibowitz *House of Leibowitz* 1988-92 courtesy artist & the Frankfurter Kunstverein, Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt



Hema Upadhyay and Chintan Upadhyay *Happy Valentines Day* 2003 courtesy artists & Chemould Gallery, Mumbai

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We gratefully acknowledge the support of the lenders: Bellas Gallery in Brisbane, Chompol Chaimongkol, The Kingpins, Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery in Sydney, Hen's Tooth Video and the Film Consortium of Canada, James Mollison, Hema Upadhyay and Chintan Upadhyay. The Chemould Gallery in Mumbai and of course Mambo. Also Rafael von Uslar, not only for his loan of the Cary S. Leibowitz works but also for his comments on the text. Above all the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney without whose preparedness to loan the essential works for the control group of *Parthenogenesis* the project would not have been possible.

We are particularly grateful to Wayne Golding, Rachel Blackley and Dare Jennings at Mambo for their time and the rich archive of images they allowed us to wallow in. The staff at both Bellas Gallery and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery (Josh, Amanda, Naomi and Robert) for their help in locating images and for the professional support they extend to the artists they represent. Also to Rilka Oakley at Ivan Dougherty Gallery for her watchful eye and constant troubleshooting on behalf of *Parthenogenesis*. A particular debt is owed to Andreas Schafmeister for the support he gave while some of the works were being collected in Europe and for the good humour he evidenced when faced with impossible quantities of baggage at Schipol. And finally, thanks to the artists who gave so freely of their time and material.

PARTHENOGENESIS

27 March – 3 May 2003

Curators Gary Carsley & Professor Liz Ashburn

Design Sally Robinson
 Publisher Ivan Dougherty Gallery,
 UNSW COFA
 PO Box 259 Paddington NSW 2021

Copyright © Ivan Dougherty Gallery, UNSW COFA and contributors

ISBN: 0 7334 2022 2

(COVER) Luke Roberts *Alice Jitterbug* (detail) 1977
 courtesy artist & Bellas Gallery, Brisbane

**IVAN
DOUGHERTY
GALLERY**

The University of New South Wales • College of Fine Arts
 Selwyn St Paddington NSW 2021 Australia Tel +612 9385 0726 Fax +612 9385 0603
 Email idg@unsw.edu.au Website www.cofa.unsw.edu.au/galleries/idg/news/
 Hours Monday to Saturday 10am – 5pm closed Sundays and public holidays

**COFA
UNSW**

PARTHENOGENESIS



PARTHENOGENESIS

“So now for two thousand intergalactic dollars (IG\$2,000) we could go into the lottery and come out with a different age, a different body, a different voice and still carry our memories (allowing for a little leakage) more or less intact.”¹ The eponymous Peter Carey short story *The Chance*, describes a world in which individuals enter a messy wire encumbered booth and exit with a completely different set of arbitrarily determined features. This is the genetic lottery inferred by the tale’s title. The year during which the events of the tale take place is not specified; it is simply three summers after the Fastalogians had arrived, displacing the Americans as our planet’s dominant purveyors of dazzling ideas and irresistible merchandise. The chronology that is certain tells us that in 1964 two retail outlets in the form of installations opened in separate parts of New York – *The American Supermarket* and the *Fluxushop & Mail Order Warehouse*. The two projects, the former essentially about ‘personal’ identity while the later prioritised the ‘social’ identity, constituted opposing conceptual poles along whose imaginary axis a large mass of subsequent visual practice coalesced. *The American Supermarket*, a project initiated by Ben Birillo included works by all the principal American pop luminaries, with actual specials like real Campbell Soup cans signed by Andy Warhol, a steal at only \$18.00. This event-like-happening was the apotheosis of unrestrained consumption and succeeded in erasing what remained of the thin line between art and life. George Maciuna’s *Fluxushop & Mail Order Warehouse*, emphasised through publications and affordable multiples the process of each individual realising their full social and cultural potential, while stressing the abolition of traditional modes of art production and consumption. In one of those moments when language creates its own factual reality, the no-mans land separating these two emporiums came to be largely occupied by women and what had traditionally been presumed to be their formal and recreational concerns – shopping, fashion and an eye for appearances.

Max Hollein in the catalogue for *Shopping-A century of Art and Consumer Culture* writes that “Purchasing is much more than the mere satisfying of everyday needs: it is the important ritual of public and communal life, through which identity is created and changed.”² Barbara Kruger, showing off a little of the chordate she picked up working for Condé Nast Publications (publishers of amongst other titles *Vanity Fair* and *Vogue*),



Craig Russell *Outrageous* 1977 courtesy Hen’s Tooth Video, NYC



Barbara Kruger *Untitled (We will no longer be seen and not heard)* 1985 Museum of Contemporary Art, J W Power Bequest

puts it more succinctly “I shop therefore I am”. The importance of free will and self-determination begun by Descartes and his assertion that “I think therefore I am” has become the 30-day interest free period on the purchase of a fully clothed and accessorised social identity. And for those of us without a credit card there is always lay-by or personality by instalment. Just as geological layers deposited over time contain the history of the world’s evolving physical environment, we can look to the accumulation of the images of ourselves for a corresponding social and cultural topography. So here we are, like diggers with silver trowels, examining the work of a small number of artists and artists’ collectives for traces of the process that repositioned visual culture in the time before the coming of the Fastalogians.

Parthenogenesis means Virgin Birth, to some it explains how the *Mambo Goddess* may have produced the *Australian Jesus* and for others it is a metaphor evocative of the particular materiality detected in new media work. As a title for an exhibition it is intended to critically engage with the often-expressed assertion that progressive, conceptually informed art generates itself free of fertilization or contact with the social body. Art made *in vitro*. I have used already a little of the language of the hard sciences, mindful of Levi-Strauss’s insistence that cultural theory should be subject to the same scrutiny as similar activity in physics and chemistry. For this reason *Parthenogenesis* takes its narrative structure from the model provided by a longitudinal study with a control or reference group and an observational group. It is the latter who count most to *Parthenogenesis*, because what we are looking for here is a vaccine against the more virulent strains of global uniformity.

Works by Cindy Sherman, Barbara Kruger and Keith Haring borrowed from the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney form the reference group of this exercise. Consensus already exists on the importance of these works, they are beautiful and their makers are either rich or dead. Not much need be contributed to the great quantity of writing already in existence about them. These artists are celebrities with substantial monographs in print and it is not a priority here to enlarge upon their fame. The observational group within the context of the model provided by a study consists of the Australian artists Luke Roberts, Julie Rrap and the collectives The Kingpins and Mambo. Canadian, Craig Russell along with Chintan Upadhyay and Hema Upadhyay, two artists from India, are from places which share with Australia a past of British colonialism and a present of marginalisation within a world culture dominated by Europe and the United States. Many case studies have someone like Cary S. Leibowitz/Candyass who fits neatly in neither category and in his work the *object acheter* did not quite displace the *object trouvé* as the evolutionary signifier of slick modernity.



The Popshop interior 1986 & Keith Haring *Baby Rocker* 1993 courtesy The Popshop

Two works in *Parthenogenesis* both date from 1977. An excerpt from Craig Russell’s film *Outrageous* which won the Silver Bear at that year’s Berlin Film Festival and Luke Roberts life-size image of *Alice Jitterbug*. It is essential to remember just how radical these *outsider* works were in the time of their making. They can be clearly read as prefiguring much subsequent art, which also offered the self multiple images of what it might become. The various personae within Luke Roberts are all extrapolations of his personal history, distinguishing his imagery from other later work of this sort that tends to be fictionalised. Roberts lives and works in Brisbane, which in the 1970s was not an imaginary Dystopia but a real place where everything except the weather was as bad as it could be. His collective material throughout the 70s has no real precursor in Australian art and to make it at all required courage and inventiveness in equal measure. *Alice Jitterbug* should not be mistaken for a conventional ‘drag’ image but evidence of what Walter Pater calls the “intolerance of the common form of things”, and is part of a conscious effort by Roberts to lift the self and its corporeal grammar out of the drudgery of orthodox usage. There is a social background to all cultural activity and Roberts’ power to be many people in his documented studio performances back then, is a poetic reminder of his legal powerlessness at that time to be himself – *‘Lest we forget’*.

Drag like photography adores the *real* because in aspiring to it it acquires some of the authority and measure of the *real*’s power to define. Craig Russell was a drag queen and in *Outrageous* he plays the queer stereotype – a hairdresser, working in a Toronto salon. He moves to New York, because as he says “No Canadian act makes it without the U.S. seal of approval.”³ Russell, who had worked in 1965 as Mae West’s private secretary could become, voice and all, any number of Hollywood stars, Judy Garland, Bette Davis and Marlene Dietrich among others. The verisimilitude of his performances astonished the audience into forgetting the celluloid prototype and he became like the subjects of his act – a star. Russell’s work in the first half of the 1970s in particular and male and female drag in general provided a pre-existing model for what latterly has become pervasive enough to be considered a genre – the performance of gender.

Describing the images in Julie Rrap’s *Anno 2000* exhibition at Sydney’s Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery George Alexander wrote that “They are heirlooms of feminine power capable of becoming bestial, transgenic harbingers of some New Amazon.”⁴ Sounds to me like an evening at Capriccio’s the legendary Oxford Street nightclub. Peggy Phelan whilst writing about male cross dressing states that “A represented woman is always a copy of a copy”⁵ but Julie Rrap’s startling originality lies in the area of female drag and in her camp paraphrasing Einstein’s *Theory of the Conservation of Matter*. She has for most of her professional life been “wearing” or popping into art history the way an Imperial Hotel Showgirl wears tits and a stunning frock. The arms and legs of the Elizabeth Taylor in *Camouflage #3* end in horses’ hooves. This brings to mind the old cockney rhyming slang “Horses Hoof/Poof” and in a city that recently featured an event with massed marching Nicole Kidmans, the search for meaning in these works begins with, rather than ends, in an epistemology of drag. Photography was not always considered art and exhibited in the context with which we are now familiar. It was the abrogation of its special relationship with reality that partially facilitated the change in photography’s status. Julie Rrap’s *A-R-mour* series however can be read as reaffirming a relationship with another reality, that of Sydney’s tradition of masquerade and the display of the self as a hive of Divas.

For a performance artist the important critical test is not the review in the papers the day after but that immediate one written in applause by the audience. The Kingpins are a collective formed of four artists each with individual practices, and on stage live, they rock! Both cinema and photography initially began with overly cultivated references to “high” art. They did this to conceal their “bloodlines stretching back into the less desirable but equally influential realm of popular entertainments, to the “low” art forms of vaudeville, phantasmagoria light shows, and wax museums.”⁶ The Kingpins do not hide this linkage but persist in reminding us that the tight rope they strut between the gallery and the nightclub is also sometimes the intravenous drip through which high culture nourishes itself by contact with the sub-culture. Their performance pieces are constructed for the stage by a cut and paste method borrowed from classical modernist practice. They lift known, easily recognised gestures, silhouettes and images from sources like posters and album covers to infer structure, rather like Andy Warhol’s insistence that incident take precedent over narrative in his films. It is refreshing that those modern, popular and democratic forms of expression like video and photography should be employed to renew historical modes of display. The Kingpins do this through their reference to and keen enthusiasm for the tableaux. For it is within this 18th and 19th century’s pictorial machine’s majestic but shallow depth, with its love of detail and full frontal striking of poses, that the music is ironically returned to its place of origin.

Hema Upadhyay and Chintan Upadhyay live in Mumbai, which when I was growing up was known to the world as Bombay. They have separate careers and working methodologies but have for some time collaborated on a series of greeting cards that they email to their friends. These cards are photomontages featuring themselves and a text component. What these images imply is that these artists have a relationship based on equality and that they are very modern. Two things that do not necessarily come to mind when one thinks of the sub continent. In these post cards the imagery plays a role in shaping and re-organising not just simply reflecting public



Julie Rrap *Camouflage #3 (Elizabeth)* 2000 courtesy artist & Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney

consciousness. The works are realised within the context of, although in opposition to, prevailing images of Indianness, giving credence to Tretyakov’s conviction that “the photograph, under the influence of the text, expresses not simply the fact which it shows, but also the social tendency expressed by the fact.”⁷ Photomontage belongs to the technological world of the 20th century, however the Upadhyay’s use it in such a way as to also reference decoupage and ‘combination’ printing, both popular 19th century techniques. In the Upadhyay’s work there is clear evidence of a resistance to the process of eroticisation that still defines the relationship between periphery and centre not only globally but also locally, and in questioning this with their direct gaze they throw their arms around us as well as each other.

Candyass, the character who speaks for the artist Cary S. Leibowitz, is Jewish, queer and unbearably miserable. He says in his artist’s statement in the catalogue published in conjunction with Prospect 93, “I like to pretend I’m someone else as much as possible so I won’t get too depressed.”⁸ He courageously confronts the standards of American normativity by radically redefining them. “This is not the choice of the revolutionary, but the position of someone forced by their mere difference to defend themselves by aggressively answering the terror of majority pressure by inflicting a terrorism of his own making.”⁹ His life story is parenthesised by thrift shops and flea markets, the cracks in the mirror of Western capitalism. In his work, the formal language of *The American Supermarket* uses the vocabulary of the *Fluxushop & Mail Order Warehouse* to articulate a figure of speech that voices refined subjectivity. Cary S. Leibowitz has developed a neuralgic approach to his installations, where strategies originally formulated to sell goods have been transferred like a tattoo to the skin of the social body. Candyass’ polemic is a delightful corruption of La Monte Young’s *Composition 1961*, draw a bent line and follow it, while whistling in the dark, ‘be not afraid be very not afraid.’

Mr. Leibowitz might very well purchase on his travels abroad in Bangkok or London a T-shirt from Mambo’s 1996 *Tough Guy* series that says “I am a bad loser. In fact I don’t do anything well”, but then again maybe not. Mambo shops are like futures exchanges where the separate disciplines of art, fashion and philosophy are traded across the commodity floor of looking good. Just as the Decalogue were fixed on two stone tablets, the tenets developed during 300 years of social and cultural progress are printed on shirts, shorts, bags and other items of apparel by Mambo in a country near Australia. The multi-cultural and pluralist world generated by the seepage of Cartesian doubt, stains the fabric from which Mambo cut their garments. Mambo are as savvy of art history as the other artists in this



Cindy Sherman *Untitled* 1983 Museum of Contemporary Art, J W Power Bequest



The Kingpins *This is my remix, Baby* 2001 courtesy artists & Shaun Gladwell