

# Under Construction: Performing Critical Identity—A Short Introduction

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*“Who am we?” Sherry Turkle*

*“Who needs ‘identity’?” Stuart Hall*

At the turn of the 2020s, identity seems to remain an omnipresent and somewhat unseizable term, serving different views in and outside academia, in politics, in everyday talk, in intellectual and popular jargon, as well as in the arts. While, currently, identitarian ideologies and essentialist notions of identity that tend to simplify and reduce life experience to simple factors globally regain massive attention, it becomes inevitable to recollect the thorough discussions of identity concepts of the past decades, which had moved away from such notions—concepts which also reflect an awareness of and capacity to deal with the complexity and diversity of the world we live in. However, this volume, *“Under Construction: Performing Critical Identity”*, does not aim to provide a comprehensive overview of identity concepts, nor to develop a uniform definition or theory of identity. Rather, it strives to add new and critical positions and perspectives to an ongoing discussion, as dealing with the concept of identity remains relevant for a wide range of academic and artistic disciplines, taking different aspects of identity into account. These presented perspectives promise to offer innovative insights by focusing on performance and the performative as both an artistic practice and mode of expression and as a process of constructing identity. While, to some, the idea of identity might be suspicious because of the danger of essentialism, and also because of the incoherent definitions and understandings of the term, it is precisely this openness that also offers the potential for escaping such fixations—an openness clearly reflected in the diversity of identity notions offered by the contributions in this volume. Linking these different perspectives, this volume stresses the notion that social identities such as gender, sexuality, race, class, dis/ability, age or non/religiosity are closely linked to the historical, social, regional and political dimensions of their formation. From this perspective, identities are hardly one-dimensional but complex and intersectional, and are rather to be thought of as a process of identification and belonging than as a consistent essence. In terms of identity, otherwise understood as, for example, a (cognitive) self-image, as a habitual imprint, as a social role or attribution, as a performative achievement,

as a constructed narrative, etc.,<sup>1</sup> it is not only the individual who is in the spotlight, but also culture, society or community as bearers of identities.

Artists have always played a major role in the potential reflection and transformation of perceptions and conceptions of the world, and their artistic praxis and positionings have been key to the development of processual and pluralistic concepts of identity, which gained momentum in the 1990s in the face of a changing, globalizing and postmodern world. Famously, Judith Butler refers to the theatricality of drag for her concept of the performativity of gendered identity (Butler 1990), and Stuart Hall's influential concept of cultural identity was closely interwoven with his personal and intellectual connection to the British Black Arts Movement (Hall 1992; Fisher 2014). It was Cindy Sherman's photo series "Shermans", as self-portraits that have no underlying identity in the sense of a substantial person, that provided the basis for Wolfgang Iser's concept of variable identities—identities in transition and identities in the plural—as paradigmatic of a postmodern affirmation of plurality and a counter-concept to Western notions of unity and wholeness (Iser 2010). Moreover, Homi K. Bhabha developed the foundations of his postcolonial thoughts on identification based on terms such as differentiation, splitting, repetition, mimicry, hybridity, third space, and the ambivalent interweaving of the construction of identity and otherness by means of some reflections on the artistic works of such artists as Renée Green, Barbara Kruger, performance artist Guillermo Gomez-Peña, conceptual artist Pepon Osorio and photographer Alan Sekula, or on the poetry by Meiling Jin or Adil Jussawalla, and the literary work by Toni Morrison and Nadine Gordimer (Bhabha 1997a, 1997b, 2004). Anthony Appiah mentions the "language of art" as a factor that provides material for the social construction of identity, and compares the process of identification to some extent with the decisions of an artist on which aspects of her inherited traditions will define her art and creativity. Appiah thus recognizes a certain agency of individuals in terms of the adoption of categories of identity, which, even though socially predetermined and normative, can also be mobilized for a self-affirmative identity (Appiah 2005). The affirmation of specific identity categories also plays an important role in the context of so-called "strategic essentialism", a term coined by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, understood deconstructively and as a political tool that allows for the temporary, strategic adoption of essentialist claims of identity categories for the collective representation, resistance and empowerment of marginalized groups for specific political objectives.<sup>2</sup> 'Identity politics' still play a role in political

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<sup>1</sup> Author's translation of (Zirfas 2010), "Identität in der Moderne. Eine Einleitung", p. 9.

<sup>2</sup> However, Spivak herself later dismissed the term "strategic essentialism" in face of its misuse for nationalist, essentialist agendas, and also warns against "identity politics" as a trap that can tie

struggles for recognition and visibility, as well as in the fields of artistic activism or artistic self-positioning.

The field of identity is contested and suspicious, especially because of the danger of fixing groups or individuals on alleged pre-given essential characteristics that are actually positionings that have been created on the basis of social norms and projections. After all, the very concept of identity primarily emerged from the idea of a substantial core. It can be dated back to the Enlightenment and 17th century epistemology and the definition of substance as a permanent entity—developed by René Descartes—which prepared the notion of a “basis for a substantial conception of identity” and of a human being equipped with a fixed, inherent core whose essential features remain essentially identical throughout its entire existence (Nicke 2018). Stuart Hall calls this “Cartesian concept of substance” (ibid.) the “Enlightenment subject,” equipped with the “essential centre of the self [as] a person’s identity” (Hall 1992, p. 275). On the basis of this genesis, the concept of identity also reveals itself as a Western enterprise. Peter Geschiere and Birgit Meyer pointed out with Roger Rouse that the “search for identity” is not universal, but “part and parcel of Western imperialism—strongly promoted . . . by the efforts of colonial regimes to fix the new identities of their new subject through the ‘identity card’”, turning colonised subjects into defined identities to be governed. They see questions of self-identification as part of the capitalist discourse with its notion of “private ownership: one has to ‘own’ an identity just as the capitalist owns his (sic) capital” (Meyer and Geschiere 1998, p. 609). Furthermore, in the course of globalization, not only flows and homogenization are to be considered, but also the emergence, closure and fixing of new borders and identities, for example, as national identities (ibid.). Today, such a fixation of essentialist identity models manifests itself especially in identitarian, namely right-wing populist, identity constructions that promise orientation for the individual self through claims of a substantial core of essence based on an alleged “national belonging of descent”, “cultural heritage”, “historical past”, “genuine tradition” or specific “national character” (Nicke 2018).

The continued presence and recurrence of strong essentialist concepts of identity and their Eurocentric and (neo)colonial foundation may be one reason why questions of identity and their critique still seem to be relevant to broader social, political and artistic discourses today. In particular, in critical artistic positions, this often becomes apparent in practices of decentering and dissolving alleged fixed identities, and in the emphatic display and reflection of the pluralities of personal identities within one individual and their intersectionality. Re-claiming such identities and positionings,

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individuals and groups to expectations and traditions. (See, e.g., (Nadig 2018), “Gayatri Spivak Warns Students against Falling ‘into the Trap of’ Identity Politics”, or (Mambrol 2016), “Strategic Essentialism”.

as well as shifting and re-inventing them, are further artistic practices, practices that are engaged with visibility, representation, and self-empowerment. They again refer to the extra-individual, relational character of identities and acts of identification, which are produced performatively along social norms, preconditions, expectations, and preconceived images, and are, therefore, always to be understood as both “recognition and imposition” (Appiah 2005).

This volume, “Under Construction: Performing Critical Identity”, points to the performative practices of artists that bring to the fore a critical (self-)awareness and (self-)positioning concerning identification and belonging. As different and maybe contradictory, among themselves, as they are, the performative works and identity positions presented and analyzed in this volume share a critical approach towards the notion of pre-determined stable identities and the hegemonic norms and stereotyping immanent to such a notion, as well as a critical appraisal of representations on the basis of identities. The artists and groups introduced in the contributions in this volume stand for different perspectives, approaches and artistic strategies, with authors who equally choose different approaches, angles, perspectives and methods. This collection is intentionally neither genre-specific nor identity-specific, nor limited to a particular geographical area or historical period. It invites readers to explore various artistic strategies and perspectives of artists when they address different identity issues or identities, such as when they target power relations, or when they empower concepts of diversity. It offers a broad range of analytical approaches and methods as well as theories and contexts underlying the arguments. Common ground for this issue is the critical stance towards the construction of identity, performed by the artists and/or the scholars dealing with this area.

The first contributions in this volume deal with a single artist’s work on issues of identity, followed by papers that focus on a specific category of identity construction and then by contributions that are engaged in collective identities. The collection is concluded by a report from curatorial practice.

In “I Am Black Now: A Phenomenologically Grounded Autoethnography of Becoming *Black* in Berlin”, Solomon A. Mekonen lets the reader participate in his personal experience of changing self- and world-perception when wandering out of what is familiar to him and into a new, unknown *Lebenswelt*. While being the unquestioned norm in his home, Ethiopia, he found himself suddenly being made ‘the Other’ when he moved to Berlin, Germany. This insight brought him to reflect on the constructedness and performativity of identities and the power of unquestioned, imposed, and universalized norms, and ultimately led him to a conceptually informed critique of hegemonic, colonial-based powers of definition. To work through these changes in perception, reflection, and self-positioning, he chooses the innovative, substantial approach of autoethnographic and creative writing.

In “Subverting Identity: Cesare Viel’s Performative Works”, Matteo Valentini introduces the Italian conceptual artist’s take on the plurality and processuality of identity, and stresses the artist’s own engagement with theorists of performative and relational identity. In numerous performative works and different formats such as lecture performances or re-enactments, Viel presents the performative production of subjectivity and identity as ambiguous and as an act of constant becoming. His performance of self is one of constant movement through different categories of identity; he, thus, constantly subverts the idea of identity altogether.

With references to contemporary Disability Studies, the Disability Arts Movement and Disability Pride, in “Let’s listen with Our Eyes ... ‘ The Deconstruction of Deafness in Christine Sun Kim’s Sound Art”, Anna K. Benedikt elaborates on an affirmative, positive perspective on disability as a social and identity category. She introduces Berlin-based US American sound artist Christine Sun Kim’s work, which is informed by her own sonic experience as a deaf person. By challenging normative understandings of sound and hearing, Sun Kim shows that deafness is a social construction and definition. Her performance of her deaf identity can be understood as a critique as she “shifts her identity from non-hearing to differently hearing” (Benedikt) and de/constructs it into a positive identity category.

At the center of the critical identity performance by Berlin-based South African artist Lerato Shadi, presented by Katja Gentric in “Makhubu, Seriti Se, Basupa Tsela—Where We’re at According to Lerato Shadi”, lies the contrasting juxtaposition of two concepts of identity, namely the egocentric Cartesian Enlightenment model, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the South African philosophical concept of expressing and perceiving one’s own self through the relation to a “you”. In her performative works, Lerato challenges the Western, Eurocentric concept of identity and takes up the concept of relational identity and subjectivity, which also has great significance in the context of recent student protests and decolonization efforts in South Africa, by taking a strong, self-confident position in relation to her pioneers and ancestresses in spirit.

In ““Transgressing” Wisdom and Elderhood in Times of War? The Shifting Identity of the Elderly Queen in the Performance of *Women of Owu*”, Pepetual Mforbe Chiangong discusses the intersectionality of gender and old age (elderhood) in a changing African/Yoruba context on the basis of a production of Femi Osofian’s play at the University of Ibadan (Nigeria). She discusses how the normative confinement of individuals to certain categories of identity brings them into crisis. On the basis of a close analysis of the theatrical, performative means of the production, Mforbe Chiangong shows the enabling of “enacting an identity in crisis on stage”. She embeds her findings in the broader context of African women’s rights and feminisms from a global perspective.

In her paper “Voicing Challenge: Trans\* Singers and the Performance of Vocal Gender”, Anke Charton examines the (self-)representations and careers of heroic baritone Lucia Lukas, male mezzo-soprano Adrian Angelico and bass-baritone Aiden K. Feltkamp to discuss the role of trans\*singers and trans\*identities in challenging the gendered Fach system of classical Western singing and casting conventions in the opera industry. She embeds her examinations in the contexts of the historical construction of gendered, binary voice systematization in classical Western singing and how it has been analyzed and perpetuated by musicologists. While, due to its specific performance practices, opera has always offered space for non-normative performativity and representations of gender, even beyond heteronormative and cisgender identities, Charton shows that the picture is a very different one when it comes to opera singing.

In “Queer Abstraction: Visual Strategies to See New Queer Futures”, Rocca Holly-Nambi investigates visual strategies of representing queer identities and queer culture in the context of a violent, homophobic social and legal situation. While the queer community in Uganda is under increasing pressure from Uganda’s infamous anti-homosexuality laws, Holly-Nambi observes a growing aesthetic productivity in Kampala, which deals with queerness and, in doing so, pursues abstraction as a communication tactic. She raises the question of whether these new visual representations and their interpretation from a queer theoretical perspective carry the promise of new queer futures in Uganda.

David AJ Murrieta Flores’s ““A Motherfucker is a Werewolf”: Gang Identity and Avant-Garde Rebellion in *Up Against the Wall Motherfucker* and the *International Werewolf Conspiracy* (1968–1970)” examines the attempt of the aforementioned art gangs to gain a radically anti-capitalist redefinition of American identity, conceived as both an individual and collective identity, and to detach it from a national–territorial definition or any given, societal norms. Murrieta Flores places this attempt of an anti-capitalist redefinition in the historical context of a general social criticism of the avant-garde. He also critically wonders to what extent the envisaged inclusion of marginalized groups into this new American identity could actually work through the representations undertaken by these primarily *white* and male art gangs.

With “Shifting Identities of Feminism to Challenge the Classical Music Canon Practices: A Beginners Guide to Guerrilla Gender Musicology”, Chandra VanderHart and Abigail Gower offer a sort of manifesto to change the strategies and tactics employed when dealing with gender-based misrepresentations in the Western classical music sector. The so-called musical canon is the main target of their criticism, which continues to make women virtually invisible in music. They examine and compare different feminist strategies of the past that have had only limited success. With their “Guerilla Gender Musicology”, they propose an alternative, more subtle approach to minimizing the gender bias in the classical music canon.

To conclude the collection of contributions in this volume, “Under Construction: Performing Critical Identity”, after the academic papers, we add an account from art practice. In “*Precarious Art: How an Intersectional Approach to Exhibiting Led to Multi-Dimensional Performances of Identity*”, curators Stacie CC Graham and Katharina Koch recapitulate a multi-part series of exhibitions and events, in whose realization I myself was involved as co-curator. The starting points for this series were the experiences of intersectional identities of Black Women Artists and Women Artists of Color in the Berlin and London art fields and the discriminatory structures and representational practices that shape and perpetuate these experiences and realities of life. The objective for the discussion was to create perspectives and strategies for change. Using several artistic positions from the project, Graham and Koch present the specificity and precarity of intersecting identities and the importance of “performing those identities as a survival strategy”.

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