Altered Egos
Altered Egos

Santa Monica Museum of Art

Curated by Karen Moss

Vernon Fisher
Patine du Roy • Maxine Henryson • Hunter Reynolds
Komar and Melamid
Charles LaBelle a.k.a. Charles Bon
Annabel Lebowitz
Theresa Paldenbury
Brian Tucker
Jan Tumlir and Kevin Sullivan
Millie Wilson

and:

ELEANOR ANTIN, LYNN HERSHMAN, PAUL MCCARTHY, ADRIAN PIPER
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## SANTA MONICA MUSEUM OF ART

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Altered Egos is a group exhibition of artists who produce art under assumed names and multiple authorship, or those who choose to explore hidden identities. Rather than simply employing a pseudonym, these artists consciously construct an alter ego or appropriate the life and art of another to create a new body (or bodies) of work that is distinct from their other artistic production. While their reasons for assuming altered egos and their respective modus operandi differ, an important aspect of Altered Egos is how the artists reject the notion of single authorship and signature style, as they redefine, represent, and reconstruct themselves.

I first conceived the idea for Altered Egos a few years ago when the Santa Monica Museum of Art received proposals from several artists who used alter egos or explored hidden identities. As the exhibition developed, I was able to include other artists from Los Angeles and some from outside California.

Making Art As a { self, { other, { other } }}

The Museum’s orientation wall, which includes documentation of a few alter egos from the early twentieth century and work by performance artists who began to use different personae or alternate identities in the 1970s, provides a historical context for the exhibition.

I made a specific choice to focus on visual artists who have had an ongoing engagement with an alter ego or another identity; those who are interested in issues of authorship; and those who use text and/or performative elements in their work. While the artists share an interest in subjectivity and self-representation, their strategies differ considerably. A few of the artists developed another identity as long as twenty years ago; others have assumed another authorship for a distinct period or phase in their production. Some employ a single alternate identity to go beyond the confines of their gender, cultural milieu, or chronological period; others use several different artistic identities, but prefer to retain their own name as the maker of their work. One keeps his own name, but appropriates someone else’s life and work, while another is the secret female alter ego of a male sculptor who wishes to remain anonymous.

This publication reiterates the exhibition’s basic concept by using a number of different voices to explore notions about altered egos and other representations. My own essay introduces the artists, discusses historical precedents and suggests some issues raised by the exhibition. Amelia Jones poses very thought-provoking questions about Marcel Duchamp’s female alter ego, Rose Selavy, and constructs a “bio-chronology” for Rose beginning with her invention in 1920. Amy Gerstler’s poignant fiction contribution, Sawson, centers on a mis-named character who struggles with identity, gender, and daily existence as he feels the pressure to “become someone.” The artists’ pages include letters, diary entries, an interview, biographies, and essays to reveal both text and sub-texts of altered egos and hidden identities. At the end of the book the reader uncovers a visual representation for the artists, either an example of their work or page art they have created especially for this publication.

Clearly, there are other artists whose work is in the realm of altered egos that could not be included in a project of this size and other exhibitions that have explored similar themes. A 1981 exhibition at the New Museum, Persona, featured video and performance artists who use alternative identities, some of whom are included in the orientation wall of this exhibition. In 1986, at the Phoenix Art Museum, Altered Egos: Samaras, Sherman, Wegman, examined appropriation in contemporary photography, concentrating on these three artists’ respective interests in self-transformation, masquerade, and the invention of a substitute self. Ordinary People, a group show of five artists each pretending to be someone else, was organized in 1991 at the non-profit Los Angeles exhibition space, the Guest Room. Many more recent exhibitions have delved into issues of self-representation and identity in terms of ethnicity, cultural identity, or sexual orientation, while a spate of current shows look at the transformation and mutability of the artist via gender-construction and cross-dressing.

As one of many projects to confront issues surrounding contemporary identities, Altered Egos attempts to reveal different strategies and expressions for a specific practice. The multiplicity and discontinuity of the different altered egos are not necessary to be interpreted, but experienced, as one encounters their respective visual presences in the gallery. Formally, they are wildly disparate: some favor traditional painting, sculpture, or photography, while others exploit the aesthetic value of found objects or the rawness of odd, everyday “low” materials. These artists use various codes, signs, and language in their art and in their own writing, creating multi-layered narratives and intertextual work. While some of their subjects are serious and confrontational, almost all of the artists employ humor, satire, and irony. Some exaggerate the drama or romanticism of their “other,” while a few self-consciously parody themselves. Using their various alter egos and appropriated characters they examine self-presentation, rethink authorship, explore the historic image of the artist, and expose socially-constructed notions of identity, gender, and sexuality. Working in the spaces between truth and fiction, the simulated and the real, the fragmented and the whole, these artists cope with living and producing in our dislocated and mediated culture.


Vernon Fisher, a visual artist and fiction writer, combines texts, images, and objects, using many voices in his narrative production. For Altered Egos, he presents three works from his 1991 series, *Hills Like White Elephants*, authored by his "characters"—Consuelo Tatroo, M. Moon, and Werner Fiche—with *Blank Slate Sky*, 1993, made under his own name. Viewed together, the work illustrates how Fisher uses characters to expand his voice, to "re-write" himself, and to question the fiction of artistic practice.

Moom's *Framed Landscape* alludes to how the subtle forces of nature, the freedom of solitude, and the awe of the infinite are given specific boundaries in the art object. Fiche's *Words* is a hanging skeleton adorned with labels of nouns referring to human needs and to natural elements. The absence of flesh is replaced by the presence of words; it is less about the "death" of language and more about how we use words to define ourselves and our ephemeral existence. After Malevich, authored by Consuelo Tatroo, includes a stuffed raccoon perched upon a tree limb—an inert, freeform and odd-piece of nature—counterbalanced by a black Malevich cross. The juxtaposition of this frozen icon of naturalism next to the ultimately pure, non-objective icon of Suprematism, testifies to Tatroo's sense of humor and penchant for referencing art history. Fisher's own *Blank Slate Sky* relates to his more recent works that incorporate chalkboards and slates. The specific text of this painting refers to cognitive therapy and compares the need to erase memory from the brain with the act of smearing words on a slate. Fisher sees a cyclical nature to this process, a continual winding down until definition is lost: the act of returning to a *tobula rosa* is necessary to record one's own history and to re-make one's own existence. Whether writing or making visual art, he refers to cognitive processes, challenging the viewer to break codes, solve puzzles, and deduce meaning from his work.

The letter printed on Fisher's artists' pages provides a thumbnail sketch of each character, but when he describes himself he asks: "Me?—if I knew I wouldn't have had to invent the others." He alludes to an epistemological problem—how can one ever truly "know thyself" in an all-encompassing manner? He shows us that one never sees from a single vantage point, but omnisciently, and because of the arbitrariness of language and meaning, our definitions of ourselves must constantly change. Just as Consuelo Tatroo "revises" the text of Hemingway's *Hills Like White Elephants*, so Fisher uses his characters to revise himself.

Maxine Henryson and Hunter Reynolds' project, *IDEA*, *The Goddess Within* explores issues of social and sexual politics, gender and identity, illness and healing. Henryson is a documentary photographer whose interest in these issues brought her into contact with one of Reynolds' performances as his alter ego, "Patina du Prey." Reynolds, a visual artist who uses performance, sculpture, and photography, initially developed his drag alter ego in 1989 to explore and confront the relationship of homophobia to the arts. Henryson and Reynolds characterize the symbiotic dynamic of their collaboration as "equal, parallel and connected, but not joined at the hip," evidenced by their diary entries in the artists' pages which reveal two different perspectives of the same events.

Their installation for Altered Egos includes 28 of Henryson's photographs taken primarily in Germany, which are hung Salon style and are accompanied by one of Patina's hand-made sculptural dresses. Henryson is the voyeuristic observer, while Reynolds is the object of her camera's gaze, a position that alters stereotypical male and female roles and traditional subject/object relationships. Observed in luxurious gardens and rambling estates, and on urban streets directly interacting with the public, Patina has evolved into someone who is both male and female, an amalgam of both masculine and feminine signs. She/he does not merely invert gender through cross-dressing, but is a self-described "transgendered embodiment of fantasy and healing" who tries to increase the public's sensitivity to both homosexuality and AIDS.

As Henryson continues to document Patina in outdoor performances from city to city, she/he interacts more with the audience. At a recent carnival in Bruges, she/he wore a dress with special bags for offerings and moved around like a whirling Dervish. Patina also performed in New York's recent Gay Pride celebration to an audience of thousands on the steps of the 42nd
Street Library, captivating the crowd with a Sufi-like dance propelled by her/his spirit. As her/his movements evolve, new codes emerge as Patina fulfills the role of “goddess” (1-DEA), a shamanistic heroine/hero who encourages healing and cultivates the awareness of those she/he meets.

Realism, whose only definition is that it intends to avoid the question of reality implicated in art, always stands somewhere between academicism and kitsch. —Jean-François Lyotard

Komar and Melamid invented the Russian realist Nikolai Buchumov in Moscow in 1973, appropriating his name from a signed canvas that they found in a trash can. According to his “autobiography,” Buchumov was a retardataire artist, an ardent naturalist who fought with an avant-gardist in 1913 and lost his left eye. Daunted by this confrontation, he temporarily gave up art, but then returned to the site of his birth to paint the exact same landscape every season for 15 years. The resulting grid of small panels, painted in a Monet-like soft-focus realism that chronicles minute changes in the landscape, includes a form that initially reads as a small promontory of land. Upon close inspection one realizes that Buchumov, a slave to verismilitude, always includes the bridge of his nose in each painting because this is exactly how he sees with his monocular vision. When the work was smuggled out of Russia, one of the 60 small panels was lost, but Komar and Melamid never replaced it since they feel this mishap makes the story more “real.” This void, just below the center of the grid, is a reminder that the panels are really objects on a wall, and that painting itself is an illusorist representation.

While the dates of this series, 1917-1931, span the years of the Revolution through the early Stalinist era, nothing in Buchumov’s placid paintings represents this pivotal period: they are as inert and lifeless as the Realist painting they parody. Likewise, the display case filled with the artist’s objects makes little reference to any historical context—the items only serve as evidence to prove the “reality” of Buchumov’s purported existence. Komar and Melamid peke fun at the self-image of artist and the loftiness of artistic pursuit through Buchumov’s rather naive and mawkish text.

The same year Komar and Melamid invented Buchumov, they created another artist, an 18th century Russian serf named Apelles Ziallov who misplaced the official government with his “abstract” art, an irony given his life dates and that his namesake is the 4th century Greek painter known for his realism. In another work of that year, Double Self-Portrait, Komar and Melamid replaced profiled images of Lenin and Stalin in an official Soviet portrait with their own, equating the political leaders with themselves. Raised in the aesthetic

and ideological confines of the former USSR, Komar and Melamid’s work revolves around questions of truth and fiction, the official and the unofficial, and what lies in between. As they grapple with the weight of both Russian history and the history of art, Komar and Melamid reveal sub-texts about painting, representation, and the “truth” of artistic identity and intent.

Tourism, human circulation considered as consumption, a by-product of the circulation of commodities, is fundamentally nothing more than the leisure of going to see what has become banal. —Guy Debord

Charles LaBelle, a Los Angeles-based visual artist, writer and curator, employs his “parallel persona,” Charles Bon, when he delves into his performative and public work. LaBelle is generally interested in painting, sculpture, and object-making, but Bon’s projects are more anthropological and sociological, often occurring in public, urban sites. In his series of Psychogeographic Excavations, he borrows Guy Debord’s term that describes the French Situationists’ use of the urban milieu and public space for activism. For Seven Paris Monuments—Santa Monica Corrrespondent, part of this continuing series, Bon proposes a re-location of famous Parisian monuments to Santa Monica. At the hub, he corresponds the Louvre to the Santa Monica Museum of Art, a humorous analogy that comments on the hegemony of French culture, monuments, and institutions. The other six monuments, sited in positions corresponding to their Paris locations, end up in places such as the Pacific Ocean or on the beach near the Santa Monica Pier. Documented in Bon’s digitally-collaged photographs, the grand monuments appear like decorative set-pieces now removed from their historical context and inserted into the seaside landscape. Also in the installation is Bon’s letter to Monseur Toubon of the French Cultural Ministry requesting a loan of the Vendome Column for the Santa Monica Civic Center renovation. Its relocation is imagined in the centerpiece of the installation, a large-scale architectural model with a miniature Vendome Column placed in the Civic Center. This absurd plan also functions as a serious proposal to create more open public spaces in the redevelopment of downtown Santa Monica.

The idea to transplant these icons from Paris—the city of lights, high art, and locus for modernism—to a Los Angeles beach town suggests a need to fill a presumed cultural void in this Mecca for popular entertainment and
recreation. Or, is Bon suggesting that in the late twentieth century the latter has already replaced the former? In this project Charles Bon simultaneously fills three roles: a producer of work (as artist, architect, or urban designer), a curator who selects and rearranges images, and a cultural critic whose deadpan presentation elicits highly ironic readings.

alter ego 1. a second self; a perfect substitute or doppelgänger (a person appointed or authorized to act as a substitute) 2. an inseparable friend.

The Random House Dictionary

Annabel Livermore, the secret alter ego of a male sculptor from El Paso, Texas, has been the artist’s “inseparable friend” for more than twenty years. She is not an invented identity used to distinguish the artist’s two different bodies of work for commercial purposes; nor is she a kitschy ploy—she is an anachronism who earnestly pursues a long-held tradition of landscape and genre painting with her vibrant garden and genre paintings inspired by her Southwestern environment and vivid imagination.

At first glance her visionary paintings recall the post-impressionist work of Van Gogh or the watercolors of William Blake, but her intense palette, expressionism, and brightly painted frames link her as closely to Mexican culture as to European modernism. Romantic poems, called “amplifications” by the artist, function as extended titles for the work. These dream-like evocations of nature, reminiscent of the poetry of D.H. Lawrence, who also spent time in the Southwest, beckon the viewer to consider the more spiritual, mystical meanings of the paintings.

Because Livermore’s work seems so different from most current art practice, its more complex and layered meanings are not immediately perceptible. Upon closer examination of the garden and landscape paintings in this exhibition, and her other work depicting genre and plaza scenes, one may find allusions to issues such as ethnicity and cultural appropriation, gender and sexuality, and the profound spiritual crisis in the late twentieth century.

Preceding the interview on her artists’ pages, “Miss Livermore” is introduced as a retired librarian with grey hair tied into a bun who wore sensible black shoes, and was part of a “generation who enjoyed shopping for Waterford crystal in high-heels and white gloves.” Her appearance, use of language, and even her art historical references seem to emanate from a by-gone era. Part sentimentalist, part sophisticate, Livermore responds to the questions with two distinct voices.

Unlike the other altered egos in this exhibition, Livermore exists as a palpable figure within the life of her community. The patroness of the Annabel Livermore Flower Fund, which supplies vases filled with fresh flowers to patients staying at El Paso’s County Hospital, she recently completed a series of flower paintings for the hospital’s non-denominational chapel. None of the volunteers at the hospital, nor those who go to her gallery openings, have ever seen the artist—she never appears in drag and the artist does not use a female surrogate as her stand-in, since he feels that would make her into a travesty. One wonders about the artist’s intentions—how can he stay anonymous and keep Livermore’s work separate from his own, given her increasingly public exhibition profile? Rather than questioning her raison d’etre or her longevity, she is best understood as an “inseparable friend” who articulates an integral part of the artist’s identity.

The artist, the true artist, the true poet, should only paint in accordance with what he sees and what he feels. He must be really faithful to his own nature. He must avoid like the plague borrowing the eyes and feelings of another man for then his productions would be lies in relation to himself, and not realities. — Charles Baudelaire

Theresa Pendlebury, who has had no fewer than twelve alter egos during the past fifteen years, explores multiple artistic identities and the image of the artist throughout history. Interested in stereotypes about artistic bohemia as an escape from her own suburban roots, Pendlebury began to work under the name of Jane McElhenny, the real name of Ada Clare, the “unofficial Queen of Bohemia” in New York’s Greenwich Village of the 1890s. Pendlebury’s Jane produced black objects in various materials (lace, yarn, mohair, charred matches, etc.) with a macabre, but contemporary sensibility embodying the Victorian themes of love, death, and romanticism.

For her Fictional Art series, Pendlebury appropriates characters from the descriptions of artists and their art in popular fiction. Using sources culled from her ongoing bibliography on the image of the artist, this new work illustrates the discrepancy between textual description, the image one conjures in the mind’s eye while reading, and a “real” object that is produced. The resulting paintings, with titles like Venus of the Computer World or Foam Rubber Culture, reveal the hyperbolic image of contemporary art and artists in popular culture, as they raise questions about style, “good” taste, value, critical acclaim, and museum presentation.

Pendlebury uses the punch line from a 1958 Saturday Evening Post cartoon, “I don’t want to grow up big and strong, I want to be pale and interesting,” as the title for the essay on her artists’ pages. This rambling semi-autobiographical monologue, with romanticized images of the artist that infiltrated her 1960’s up-bringing, is profusely footnoted with both meaningful and insignificant details that valorize the incidents of her creative past. After working as an occupational therapist, the narrator finally is able to pursue her Art Career. Pendlebury did in fact work as an occupational therapist, using crafts as a healing tool for non-verbal patients to help them “reorder compulsive defenses.” While psychiatric patients have no control over
their expression of different personalities, Pendlebury consciously invents multiple identities in order to add layers to her work, and to avoid being cobbyholed as a certain type of artist working exclusively in a particular manner or medium. With Fictional Art, Pendlebury now delves into using an increased number of artistic personalities and returns to making paintings. As she uses this new group of characters, each with their own peculiar signature style, Pendlebury comments on the image of the artist filtered through popular culture, and the problem of translating and interpreting texts, as this multiple authorship diversifies and informs her own work.

To invent anything at all is an act of sheer genius, and in a commercial age like ours shows considerable physical courage. On the other hand, to corroborate a falsehood is a distinctly cowardly act.  

—Oscar Wilde

Brian Tucker’s The Hidden World presents the life and work of Richard Sharpe Shaver, an author, painter, and theorist of human misery. Including paintings, historical photographs, publications, and Shaver artifacts, Tucker augments the installation with graphic representations, texts, and other displays that he has produced himself. At the entrance the viewer is given a mock-Acoustigraph with an audiotaped tour produced by Tucker that presents a documentary-style, objective presentation about Shaver’s art, life, and work. Despite the rather dead-pan, formal tone of the tape, the viewer is confronted with some of Shaver’s claims, including the discovery of an ancient phonetic “Mantong” alphabet, the key to all human language. Shaver believed that the Earth was once populated by immortal giants, intellectually superior race who built vast cities in underground caverns, projected holographic images through rocks, and eventually degenerated into a sadistic race known as the “Dero.” To further illustrate and prove the existence of these “anunnaki” cultures of the earth, Shaver made the paintings at the culmination of Tucker’s installation.

These theories, known collectively as the “Shaver Mystery,” were substantially re-written by editor Ray Palmer who published them in the pulp science fiction magazine Amazing Stories. Shaver constructed his theories by borrowing from biblical, historical, and mythological texts, Palmer re-wrote and published them, and now Tucker re-presents them in a cycle of appropriation that mirrors the processes of cultural and intellectual production throughout history.

As one tours through his installation, one begins to question both Tucker’s role as the author/artist in relation to Shaver’s bizarre theories. By choosing such radical, questionable texts and re-presenting them as “fictionalized truth” (the artist’s own term), Tucker baits his audiences to ask questions: whose work is this? what does it mean and why is it exhibited in a contemporary art museum? Originally presented on a smaller scale for his MFA exhibition at the California Institute of the Arts, Tucker’s project raises issues about the role of an author, the veracity of text, the problem of re-writing history and other postmodern ideologies at the core of that art school’s curriculum. As it challenges the production of theory and its relative value for artists, Tucker also provides an opportunity for the public to react to the presumed validity of authoritative texts, objective documentation, and codification within an institutional framework. By choosing objects and other materials from his own collection, he reconstructs Shaver’s eccentric ideas as he pleases, assuming the concurrent roles of author, curator, and collector.

Isn’t the ‘death of the subject/author’ position tied by more reversal to the very ideology that invariably glorifies the artist as genius, whether for marketing purposes or out of conviction and habit? Hasn’t capitalist modernization itself fragmented and dissolved bourgeois subjectivity and authorship, thus making attacks on such notions somewhat quixotic?  

—Andreas Huyssen

Jan Tumil and Kevin Sullivan, who first began to collaborate as artist Paul Varnac in 1987, present his “complete” works in an installation of paintings and sculptural objects, performance documentation, and excerpts from the artist’s ongoing diaries. Varnac, an enigmatic figure who has exhibited and performed in artists’ spaces and alternative galleries, is now viewed retrospectively for the first time. Although the name Varnac is an anagram for Cravan (a reference to Arthur Cravan the dadaist and boxer who disappeared) one cannot help but read it as “varnac-ular,” a testimony to the artist’s intentional use of simple materials and found objects with odd or prosaic titles. Varnac’s early diary entries, written in a pseudo-heroic, romantic language, mimic the kind of drama and tragedy found in the writings of Gauguin or Van Gogh. In one entry he laments: “Nobody knows my name, yet I remain an important artist—is this really so impossible, so absurd?”

Vacillating between self-doubt and pompous pretension, Varnac is an outsider obsessed with galvanizing his place in the art world. He expounds on his ideas in public lectures with the titles On My Work, On the History of Art, and On Contemporary Culture, promotes himself on a radio show, and makes a work that is simply a label reading “Sweet Snelm of Success.” Some of Varnac’s production is purely promotional or contextual—material he provides to decode his work, rather than autonomous art objects. Despite this, he is still a cipher, an amorphous, self-conscious subject who obsessively tries to define himself as he searches for meaning.

In the diary entry included in this book, Varnac describes how just when he almost gave up his quest for meaning, it suddenly appeared at his door. Only when his “true nature” was revealed to him, could he stop pretending to be someone else. Will Varnac still be useful to Sullivan and Tumil now that he has
reached this long-awaited moment of significance? Does the title of the installation imply a finale, an eradication of the Varnac who has finally found himself? Sullivan and Tumil present Varnac retrospectively, acknowledging his (their?) desire for public acceptance. They humorously employ tropes of artistic self-presentation, as they toy with issues of authorship, subjectivity, and significance.

If the body is not a ‘being’ but a variable boundary, a surface whose permeability is politically regulated, a signifying practice with a cultural field of gender hierarchy and compulsory heterosexuality, then what language is left for understanding this corporeal enactment, gender, that constitutes its ‘interior’ signification on its surface? 15 — Judith Butler

Millie Wilson has employed several identities during the past six years to deconstruct the historically and socially constructed images of women artists and to create layered narrative sub-texts about gender, sexuality, and life as a lesbian. For her FAUVE SEMBLANT PETER (A YOUNG ENGLISH GIRL) from 1989, Wilson invented a fictitious artist, a lesbian cross-dresser living on the Left Bank of Paris during the early twentieth century. Objects and documentation, including a photograph of Wilson posing as Peter, were arranged in a museum-like presentation that exposed the suppression of women and lesbians in both art history and in contemporary discourse. In THE PAINTER WHO IS NOT ONE: MILLIE WILSON/ROMAINE BROOKS (1990), Wilson equated herself with Brooks, one of the few lesbians acknowledged in twentieth century art history. Wilson’s more recent, elegant fetish objects, with their witty art historical allusions to dada, surrealism, minimalism, and pop art, continue her investigation of the stereotypes, language, and politics of lesbian subjects.

Wilson’s ALTERED EGOS installation, LEE’S LOCKER (M.D./M.O./M.W.), refers to the story of Aileen (“Lee”) Wuornos, a lesbian now on Florida’s death row for killing seven men. Wuornos, who made her living as a sex worker, admitted to killing the men in self-defense, but was eventually convicted of six murders. Sensational media descriptions claimed that Wuornos kept a locker in which she stored items removed from the cars and bodies of the men she killed. Wilson’s installation imagines the contents of the locker — a series of fetized objects produced by herself, dadaist Marcel Duchamp, and surrealist Meret Oppenheim, all authored under the initials M.D./M.O./M.W. Her elegant puns on readymade and surrealist objects, displayed like jewels in a long, dark corridor, are incongruous surrogates for the grisly trophies that Lee purportedly kept in her locker. Like a womb, a tunnel, or a large box with a door that is always open, the simulated locker seems to reference female anatomy and the sexual promiscuity that implicated Aileen Wuornos and led the press to brand her as “the lesbian serial killer.” Catherine Lord’s contribution to Wilson’s artists’ pages, an extract from "A Body To Die For," a gripping text about the body politics of that conviction and may eventually execute Wuornos, fleshes out the sub-texts of Lee’s story—personal betrayal, criminal injustice, misogyny, and homophobia. As in Wilson’s previous work, the intertextual approach of Lee’s Locker posits multiple meanings about authorship, art historical significance, stereotypes about lesbians and the fear of the power of women.

Antecedents of Altered Egos

The strategy of creating altered egos used by the artists in this exhibition is not just a recent phenomenon, but is part of a tradition that emanates from the nascent stages of modernism. The image of the artist in the mid-19th century, characterized by Baudelaire’s “heroes of modernism” dressed in “crazes and patent-leather boots,” was that of a sovereign individual, a truth seeking male with an insatiable thirst for originality, authenticity, and the new. Positioning themselves as pioneers of avant-garde sensibility, these artists typified the “dandy,” an image central to the definition of the modern artist. Simultaneously bourgeois and dissident, they straddle the oppositional forces of convention/invention; tradition/novelty; rules/freedom; and nature/artificiality.

Literature, theater, and visual art of the fin de siècle went beyond art forms—they spawned life-styles. Literary bohemians of the 1890s such as Oscar Wilde, J.K. Huysmans, and Josephin Peladan instructed readers on how to become dandies and role-playing aesthetes. The idea of self-transformation runs rampant throughout Symbolism, including what Peladan called kaloprosopia, or the “art of personality,” the willful transformation of personality aimed at making an “art of the self.” 18 An extreme example of this is the writer Alfred Jarry, who eschewed his own individuality and conflated art with life by transforming himself into Ubu, his fictional, invented character from his play Ubu Roi.

While alternate authorship or pseudonyms were a
common practice for writers and actors, they were less common for visual artists. The burgeoning medium of photography, however, provided a new way to capture the image of the artist. Publications like the French *Galeries contemporaine, littéraire, artistique* (1876-1884), emphasized physiognomy, gesture, and demeanor in portraits of artists and writers. 19 The *carte-visite*, a small card featuring eight exposures taken in one sitting, was a pocket-size, multiple-pose portrait postcard. While these standard formats allowed the sitter to perform for the camera, other artists staged dramatic or allegorical self-portraits such as F. Holland Day's portrayal of himself as the crucified Christ. Precursors to later artists who perform and document themselves, these examples reflect Barthes' idea of the photograph as a certificate of presence that alters or augments one's identity and serves as irrefutable "proof" of the subject's being. 20

By the turn-of-the-century, the notion of self-presentation and self-fashioning had traversed genres, with early twentieth century avant-garde artists whose inter-disciplinary work foreshadows today's performance art. The Italian Futurist synthetic theater used marionettes combined with live actors as artistic surrogates. Russian Cubo-Futurists invented the concept of "self-painting" as they painted their faces, wore earrings, and placed radishes in the lapels of their jackets to shock the St. Petersburg and Moscow bourgeoisie. At Zurich's dada Cabaret Voltaire, Hugo Ball delivered his sound poems as various costumed characters, and the poet Janco made masks for the artists to assume different personae.

While Marcel Duchamp often used initials, pseudonyms, and puns on his own name, his most profound foray into an alternate authorial presence was his celebrated female alter ego, Rose Sélavy. Duchamp first invented, cross-dressed, and "performed" as Rose in 1920, and is documented in a series of photographic portraits taken by Man Ray (1920-24). When pronounced in French, her name translates as "eros, that is life," a reference to her status as Duchamp's female "other" who embodies the commodified, chic "new woman" of that era. As Marcel's engendered female "other," Rose enabled Duchamp to operate on many aesthetic and conceptual levels as she evolved from muse to an author, a producer of actual works. Duchamp's identity as Rose questions authorship, satisfies the artist's own desire for performativity, and challenges cultural assumptions about the boundaries of gender and sexuality. 21

Dadaist Kurt Schwitters first used the name Anna Blume to satirize a bourgeois woman in a 1919 assembled poem. 22 As his literary alter ego and surrogate female author, Anna "published" her memoirs in 1922 and appeared in a score for a *gesamtkunstwerk*, one of Schwitters' "total artworks" that prefigure later happenings and performance art. Anna's final metamorphosis in a 1947 collage using female images from comics and cards is part of a Schwitters series that is considered an important precursor to Pop art.

Dada-turned-surrealist Max Ernst's allegorical self-representation, "Loplop," a half-bird-half-beast character arose from his interests in psychoanalysis and experiments with *frottage*. Loplop appears in a series of three-dimensional collages (1929-32) presenting images and subjects by the artist on easels in a "picture-within-a-picture," which functions as Ernst's own visual autobiography. 23

Surrealism, predisposed towards psychoanalysis and transformation, pivots on the image of the artist and issues of identity. Poet Robert Desnos' dream-like flights from the self or Andre Breton's character Nadja who operated in multiple states of existence are but two of the examples of self-transformation in surrealist literature. *Exquisite Corpse (cadavre exquis),* a parlor game played by surrealists in cafés or at soirées and meetings, are collective drawings or texts made by several authors. 24 This process inverts the idea of one person making work with multiple authorship and yields one image with multiple authors—a collaborative, hybrid identity that reads as a composite but disjunct figure or text.

Another surrealist artist who explored the idea of the divided, multiple self was Claude Cahun, the male alter ego of a lesbian who was born as Lucy Schwob. 25 Cahun's photo-montaged self-portraits include images that could be construed as both male and female, a mutable, androgynous identity of both masculine and feminine personae. Using masks and other forms of masquerade, Cahun repeatedly cycles her images over and over again to create multiple selves, manipulating the representation of her own subjectivity. Constructing identity as something transformational and liberating, Cahun's work prefigures many ideas of later post-war work including feminist art.

A person frees himself from himself in the very act by which he makes himself an object for himself. 26 —Jean Paul Sartre

Performance art and feminist art of the 1970s investigated identity and self-transformation, particularly in autobiographically-oriented work about the body, gender, and sexuality. Not surprisingly, this period abounds with instances of artists living, working, and acting as another. In the early 1970s, as artists began to document their performance work in photography, film, or in the newly available medium of video, many used these tools to develop ongoing alter egos and different personae. With their credo to make the personal political, feminist artists, in particular, used identity to restore subjectivity and voice to women making them speaking subjects rather than silent objects. They often explored psychological terrain and exhibited private personae in public to test social and sexual boundaries.

In 1975 Lynn Hershman began to construct her alter ego, Roberta Breitmore, a "portrait of alienation and loneliness." 27 Presented by Hershman in a "private performance based in real time and real life," Roberta had a driver's license, checking account, credit cards and a wardrobe; she answered classified ads for a roommate, looked for jobs, and saw a therapist to battle depression—all signs used to substantiate her existence. 28 She attended Weight Watchers and art openings with the blond wig, make-up, and purse that became her trademark. Included
in this exhibition are an annotated, painted photographic "self-portrait," Constructing Roberta Breitmore (1975), explaining the cosmetic formula used to transform Lynn into her alter ego and Roberta's Language Chart and Roberta's Handwriting Chart, other diagrammatic analyses of her character and personality. Diaries, a comic strip, and taped documentation also chronicled her "life," and eventually she was cloned into "multiples" when four different people besides Hershman posed as Roberta. The 1977 exhibition, Lynn Hershman Is Not Roberta Breitmore, included a full range of work and documentation and a catalogue written from multiple viewpoints by four writers.\(^{29}\) When her alter ego's traumas began to haunt her, Hershman ended the performance in 1979 with Roberta's three-part alchemical exorcism at Lucretia Borgia's crypt in Ferrara, Italy. As Hershman has said, "Many people assumed I was Roberta. Although I denied it at the time and insisted that she was her "own woman" with defined needs, ambitions, and instincts, I feel in retrospect that we were linked." Perhaps more than any performance of this era, Hershman's full articulation of her alter ego Roberta Breitmore raises questions about personal alienation, self-transformation, and, of course, the thin line between art and life.

Unlike Hershman who worked with one particular alter ego, Paul McCarthy works with many different personas. He first incorporated masks and costumes into his visceral body and performance work to establish a repertory of different personas that he has used subsequently. Employing full-headed, rubber Halloween masks, costumes, and constructed environments, McCarthy developed his own narratives and language to articulate specific characters. Among these are the Arab from Political Disturbance (1976), the old man in a suit known as Grand Pop (1977), and the bi-gendered figure with breasts and men's underwear know as Pig Man (1980) in this exhibition. McCarthy has always found it important to cover his face, to literally mask his own identity while performing, and he initially would cover his face with tape, or with mayonnaise—but as he defined his performance characters, he felt the use of a mask became important. As McCarthy has said, "The masks are environments around my head. My voice is louder around the mask... The notions of outside-inside, reversal, mis-meaning, and repulsion have always been important." Hyperbolic, cartoon-like, and often covered with the "flux" of ketchup or mayonnaise as surrogate bodily fluids, the characters are the vehicles for many subconscious and unconscious meanings. McCarthy's various personas, performed through the masks, evoke not only different aspects of himself, but what he has referred to as "the experience of existence."

Eleanor Antin, who initially worked as a conceptual artist, also employs several personas as alter egos—A King, A Ballerina, A Nurse, and A Black Movie Star. Devised to satisfy her preoccupation with autobiography and what she calls the "slippery self," these four basic personae appear and reappear in various incarnations throughout her writing, live performances, videotapes, and photographic series since 1972. Jonathan Crary has called Antin's ability to wander from one identity to another a kind of "psychological vagrancy," as she "becomes a shifting collage of multiple selves, a palimpsest on whom remain the inscriptions of all her roles."\(^{30}\) This continual re-making of her identity, shifting in and out of different selves constitutes a constantly evolving autobiography. This exhibition includes examples of Antin's photographic works from the Angel of Mercy, as Crimean War nurse Florence Nightingale; The King of Solana Beach, her drag performance in various public settings as King Charles I of England; and Eleanor Antinova as Focobanta, one of the many roles as her fictional black American dancer of the Ballet Russe. Whether validating the role of women as caregivers, masquerading as a male monarch to question authority and sex roles, or exposing Diaghilev's racist fascinations with the exotic "other," Antin traverses the boundaries of history, gender, and skin color to fulfill her feminist and autobiographical desires.

Adrian Piper has always concentrated on the relationship of the self to the other, from her autobiographical works about her own bi-raciality to those that confront the social implications of race and gender. In particular, she uses self-transformation to alter her identity and to explore herself as an art object. In her early performance work she transformed herself using foul odors and odd behaviors, then went into public to provoke responses in the streets and on the subways. This self-transformation gradually evolved into Piper's persona of the Mythic Being, where she poses as a young, angry man of color in photographs and in drag performances. According to Piper: "To become the Mythic Being was to elicit, through contacts with others, and recollection of my own past, a masochistic version of myself. The transformation was dynamic, intersexual and fluid."\(^{31}\) In a 1975 performance, Some Reflective Surfaces, Piper first used white face and mustache to transform herself into a white male to cross lines of both her gender and race. The work included in this exhibition, It's Just Art, an audience-oriented performance that confronted the evasion of political responsibility in the Cambodian crisis, includes a continuous film of the Mythic Being repeatedly looking into the camera. With this particular projection of the Mythic Being, Piper not only turns the table on her own identity, but inverts spectatorship, making the audience/viewer feel the discomfort that a person of color or woman feels when constantly being viewed. As in other work, Piper uses her own self-transformation to directly confront the viewer about their own racism, sexism, and xenophobia.

Artists Antin, Hershman, McCarthy, and Piper are among many who used alter egos, personae, and self-transformation in performance and video art during the 1970s. In viewing their photographs and documentation, one sees how their own bodies and live actions perform different identities. In Antin's "slippery selves," Hershman's "alchemical" portrait of Roberta, McCarthy's various personae, and Piper's Mythic Being, the artists physically change themselves using make-up and props to masquerade as another, as they explore the social and psychological ramifications of self-transformation. In the process they reveal issues of feminism, sex-role and racial stereotypes, gender construction and sexuality that came to the fore in
the 1970s and have become even more charged in the 1990s. Their work does not focus purely on existentialist ideas or modernist notions of self-reflexivity, but seems more related to postmodern ideas of dislocation, multiplicity, mutability, and the “performative” drift of the self. While today their respective work still evidences similar ideas, the ephemeral performances that often took place outside the system in public or in alternative spaces, have now evolved into intermedia and installation work presented in more traditional galleries and museums. These artists, who have investigated issues of identity for twenty years, are important precursors to the more recent visual art and installations in the exhibition.

Conclusion

Let us return to the story of multiplicity, for the creation of this substantive marks a very important moment. It was created precisely in order to escape the abstract opposition between the multiple and the one, to escape dialectics; to conceive the multiple in a pure state, to cease treating it as a numerical fragment or a lost Unity or Totality, and instead, to distinguish between different types of multiplicity. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari

The participants in this exhibition—whether young, emerging artists, or more established and mid-career—practice in an era of postmodernism, which includes various discourses that rethink subjectivity, authorship, and production. Generally speaking, these new discourses are non-essentialist as opposed to absolute; differentiating and multiple instead of totalizing and unified; destabilized versus stable; open and diffuse as opposed to closed or binary. Liberated by less distinct boundaries, alleviated from the burdensome weight of history, freed from the unitary significance of text and the search for ultimate truths, it makes sense that these artists explore the possibilities of the self as more fluid, variegated, and transformative.

Whether using an altered ego, a parallel persona, an “inseparable” friend, or an en-gendered other, the artists in this exhibition propose various solutions to the “struggle for subjectivity.” While their respective visual art productions are as different as their respective personae, to one degree or another, they all alter their own identity or authorship as they question subjectivity in their installations and in written texts. One may see their tendency towards altered egos in the context of specific issues pertaining to authorship and language; performance, spectatorship, and presentation; and contemporary psychological, social, and cultural conditions.

In defining “author-function” Michel Foucault discusses how the contemporary author (subject) “gives rise to a variety of egos and to a series of subjective positions” as it becomes fragmented, delineated, and discontinuous as discourse itself. By assuming another identity, the artists automatically reflect the destabilized author and subject as they alter or problematize their own authorial presence.

Several artists in this exhibition further challenge the notion of single authorship by choosing to collaborate with another artist, as they eschew notions of the singular artistic genius.

All of the artists in Altered Egos utilize an overlay of both visual and written texts in their work to create meta-texts, meta-histories, and meta-narratives. Some provide a brief biography, description, or written correspondence of their artistic other; others tell a lengthy story or construct a narrative using historicizing, valorizing, and vernacular texts to flesh-out their persona and activities. They seem to evidence Jacques Derrida’s idea of polyvalence, multiple voices, each with their own valence, or what Mikhail Bakhtin has called “dialogical voice,” shifting, multiple, interactive, or conversational voices that considers the nature of language in a more social context. Language is also a catalyst not only for textual narrative, but for the performativity inherent to their representations of the artistic self. At the core of all the artists’ work is the way they use language and text to not only exhibit, but to “perform” themselves and their personae. If this performativity is not explicit, then it is implicit in the act of presenting another self(s) in a public space. Some artists—Charles Bon, Paul Varnes, Patina du Prey, Adrian Piper, Eleanor Antin—perform in public sites and on the street; others perform themselves within the confines of a museum in very discreet niches that function like individual exhibitions within the gallery space. As the spectators wander their way through the separate installments, one sees how carefully each is constructed to unveil these private, hidden, or fictitious selves to the public. Other participants play dual roles as both artists and as curators, presenters, or impresarios by placing their own work and fetishizing their own self-presentation. The respective manifestations of their altered egos are transgressions into the institutional framework—a place where things are supposed to emanate truth and beauty, or fiction.

While there are taxonomic differences between using pseudonyms or adopting personae versus constructing more fully articulated, even inseparable alter egos, the artists in the exhibition very consciously appropriate other identities, even if they retain their own name as author. Their strategies have been addressed within artistic practice, but not specifically in psychological or psychoanalytic terms. One reason for this was to avoid pathologizing their personalities or their production, but a few general observations can be made. By assuming another identity, either in name or practice, they demonstrate an impulse to expand upon their own ego formation and function, but as a whole, their work appears closer to Lacanian theory than to Freudian doctrine. Lacan’s idea that the unconscious is structured like a language, or that the relationship between the self and the other is determined not directly, but by a symbolic order that distances us from truth, seems very applicable to the artists in this exhibition whose work revolves around fiction. With this predilection, they seem more interested in utilizing multiplicity, mutability, and dis-integration, rather than making attempts to integrate identity into a centered, unified, or fixed whole. Some work makes overt psychological or psycho-sexual references
Altered Egos

(Fisher's text on cognitive therapy and memory; Antin, McCarthy, Piper, and Reynolds' cross-dressing to explore gender constructions; Wilson's fetishized objects and allusions in Lee's 'Locke'), while others deal with more general issues of the artist as an alienated personality attempting to unify life and desire.

While the idea of altered egos, persona, and self-transformation are not new, one wonders why there seems to be a recent increase in this type of artistic practice. Perhaps it is part of the lingering reaction to the commodity and object-oriented work of the 1980s that has led artists of the 1990s to produce more ephemeral, conceptual, and performance-based work that often centers on personal, social, and political issues such as identity or sexuality. More likely, it results from a generation that trained and teach in institutions that encourage them to challenge authorship and to explore different modes of self-representation, as they meld the conceptual with the personal. I suggest that this preoccupation also results from our complicated cultural and social conditions that challenge everyone's attempts to maintain a stable, cohesive identity and sense of self.

I am writing this essay in Santa Monica, at the edge of Los Angeles, at the edge of our continent, at the edge of the century, about artists who push at the edges of identity. How does one construct identity or re-present oneself when we are forced to assume so many roles and consume so many images? Popular culture is riddled with representations of multiple identities: animated superheroes and heroines in cartoons and comic books, or those in recent films including Jack Nicholson's transformation in "Wolf," the gender-ambiguous "Par" from Saturday Night Live, the male transvestite in "Crying Game," Jennie Livingston's portrait of transsexuality in "Paris Is Burning," and the high-tech morphing in "Mask." In the cyber-world, computer e-mail pseudonyms alter gender and hide true identity, while video games and virtual reality provide seemingly endless possibilities to electronically simulate identity and environments. As we begin to channel surf 500 cable stations and speed our way down the information highway into the 21st century, questions of authorship and identity become paramount not only for artists, but for the rest of us who try to devise various formulas to cope with a complex and dislocated world.


4 For a comprehensive list of recent exhibitions on these topics during the past few years, see the Exhibitions Compendium in Bad Girls (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art and Cambridge MIT Press, 1994).


10 This is provided by the El Paso Foundation, an endowment made from a portion of the sales of her paintings.


15 Bartels, 32.

16 Faulkner, 32.


18 Ibid, 15.


21 This exhibition embraces Rose not as the origin for the contemporary proliferation of alter egos, but as an important precursor, discussed in detail in Amelia Jones's contribution to this book.


23 Werner Spies, Max Ernst A Retrospective (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 1984), 145.

24 The Return of the Cadaver Exquis, an exhibition of contemporary examples of this game, organized by the Drawing Center in New York in 1993, is also on view at the Santa Monica Museum of Art during the Altered Egos exhibition.


27 Martha Rosler, " The Private and the Public Feminist Art in California, " Artforum (September 1977), 73.


