

## THE ART OF IDENTITY

*"Those who stand for nothing fall for anything".*

Alexander Hamilton

Many artists, writers and philosophers have tried to define the concept of identity. This is not the main aim of this article – the aim is to explore a few key approaches to defining identity, but more importantly, to discuss minority identity and social- versus individual identity, as well as the role that artists play in expressing this identity. This article therefore endeavours to investigate how artists respond to the expression of identity. We will investigate some artists who share their views on identity.

The issue of identity seems to be an on-going debate in our broader society, and has always been a favourite topic to investigate in art. For instance: do we, as individuals, put our cultural, i.e. social identity, first by assimilating into the group that we belong to, or do we place our individual identity above all else, and remain individuals within a given society?

### Defining Identity

*"I've grown certain that the root of all fear is that we've been forced to deny who we are".*

Frances Moore Lappe

In contemporary society one can change one's identity on an hourly basis, so the concept of a set life-long identity has truly reached its sell-by date. In the interest of creating a contextual framework and point of departure, a few core identity concepts will be discussed.

Firstly WordNet at Princeton defines identity as:

S: (n) **identity** – personal identity, individuality- the distinct personality of an individual regarded as a persisting entity.

S: (n) **identity** – the individual characteristics by which a thing or person is recognised or known.

S: (n) **identity** – identicalness, indistinguishability (exact sameness) "they shared an identity of interests".

In context of understanding and discussing minority versus social identity the following theories are relevant:

**Social identity theory** was termed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner in 1979 to understand the psychological basis of intergroup discrimination. It consists of four elements:

- Categorisation: We often put others (and ourselves) into categories. Labelling someone a *Muslim*, a *Turk*, a *Gimp* or a *soccer player* are ways of saying other things about these people;

- Identification: We also associate with certain groups (our *in-groups*), which serves to bolster our self-esteem;
- Comparison: We compare our groups with other groups, seeing a favourable bias toward the group to which we belong;
- Psychological Distinctiveness: We desire our identity to be both distinct from and positively compared with other groups.

Social identity theory is a diffuse but interrelated group of social psychological theories concerned with when and why individuals identify with, and behave as part of, social groups, adopting shared attitudes to outsiders. It is also concerned with what difference it makes when encounters between individuals are perceived as encounters between group members. Social identity theory is thus concerned both with the psychological and sociological aspects of group behaviour.

Reacting against individualistic explanations of group behaviour on one hand, and tendencies to reify the group on the other, Tajfel sought an account of group identity that held together both society and individual.

Where personal identity is salient, the individual will relate to others in an interpersonal manner, dependent on their character traits and any personal relationship existing between the individuals. However, under certain conditions *“social identity is more salient than personal identity in self-conception and that when this is the case behaviour is qualitatively different: it is group behaviour”*.

According to Giddens *“Social identities... are associated with normative rights, obligations and sanctions which, within specific collectivities, form roles. The use of standardised markers, especially to do with the bodily attributes of age and gender, is fundamental in all societies, notwithstanding large cross-cultural variations which can be noted”*.

Our definition and expression of identity largely depends on the cultural grouping that we are born into. In modern-day Western culture, being an individual is seen as the basis of having a true identity (influenced heavily by the advent of ‘Pop-Psychology’). Westerners endorse the notion that ‘everyone is unique’ (just like everybody else?). It is increasingly accepted that individuals are brands in their own right, and more and more people are being mindful of how to build their individual brands within broader society. Human rights legislation also places an emphasis on the rights of the individual as opposed to that of the group. (It should be noted, however, that the right to Freedom of Association is also recognised as a human right within the broader human rights framework).

In African culture, for example, social identity and -rights are still favoured above the identity and rights of the individual. In South Africa the principle of *ubuntu* is widely accepted. The Zulu word *ubuntu* translates roughly as “humanity towards others”. But it encapsulates a broader, more encompassing meaning. As the spiritual foundation of African societies, *ubuntu* involves a belief in a universal bond of sharing that connects all of humanity, a unifying worldview best captured by the Zulu maxim *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* – *“a person is a person through other persons”*.

Another African proverb that is widely supported is: *"It takes a village to raise a child"*. Therefore, the communities we live in shape us. In these cultures social identity takes precedence. This approach seems healthy for the majority of these communities but becomes a particular challenge when someone steps outside of the confines of the group identity, for instance if someone wants to challenge certain cultural aspects or is perhaps homosexual. These individuals are often ousted and viewed as acting disrespectfully towards the group. Being gay is often termed as 'un-African' and homosexual behaviour is condemned, often violently so, especially towards lesbian women. The group view is that such a woman has 'betrayed' her clan by not fulfilling her duty as wife and mother.

In such cases one would assume that these ousted individuals would live on the fringes of society preferring not to associate with the social identity, but if one investigates minority identity, it seems clear that social identity still strongly influences how these groups view and express their own personal identity.

There are some parallels between Jewish- and GBLT (Gay, Bi-sexual, Lesbian and Transgender) identity as part of minorities within broader society. For example, there often seems to be an identity 'schizophrenia' amongst some gay and Jewish individuals. One often finds that individuals associate themselves with the bigger social (group) identity, and in the process cedes their individual (personal) identities to the group in order to conform and avoid rejection. The minority social identity becomes such an important identifier that one is quite often unable to discern the true identity of the individual. But this begs the question: Is there one 'true' or 'normal' identity that one should ascribe to? This is an important question that will be investigated in this article.

The state of affairs seems even sadder amongst homosexuals who often primarily identify with their sexual identity, therein reinforcing stereotypes to the broader society.

Everything else seems to become secondary. It is very common to come across groups of gay men who seem to have syndicated identities. And it doesn't matter where in the world you come across these 'identity' syndicates'; they all too often have similar behaviour patterns and even dress sense; a globalisation of identity!

One could argue that as a 'member' of a minority group a gay person will find safety and acceptance amongst like-minded people. This was especially true when homosexuality was banned (and is still the case in countries where it is still illegal). Many gay people in so-called 'free' and accepting societies, however, are starting to challenge this notion, as they would prefer to be assimilated into their broader society and not predominantly be defined by their sexual identity. There seems to be a welcome evolution towards one's own unique gender identity as opposed to living up to tired and shallow stereotypes.

Some even go as far as to argue that one does not need to celebrate gay rights as society has evolved and accepted gay people. In theory this approach might make sense, but in reality just because a minority group enjoys protection under the law it does not mean that the broader society has undergone the necessary mind-shift to truly accept them within that society. Very few people seem to fully grasp and respect the principle of 'separate but equal', especially when it comes to homosexuality. Although human rights documents might recognise a person's right to human dignity, equality and free association, it does not mean one's neighbour will!

But, where does this leave the artist who wants to express his/her individual identity in such a social context? These artists often choose to operate within the 'Western' paradigm, and ironically never really expose and challenge the communities who might benefit most from it. In such a case it seems like the artist is 'preaching to the converted', i.e. the artistic community.

## The Labelling Theory

For purposes of the discussion at hand, the Labelling theory plays a key role. According to Ronald Akers in his book *Criminological Theories*, "*Labelling theory (or social reaction theory) is concerned with how the self-identity and behaviour of an individual is influenced (or created) by how that individual is categorised and described by others in their society. Originating in sociology and criminology, the theory focuses on the linguistic tendency of majorities to negatively label minorities or those seen as deviant from norms, and is associated with the concept of a self-fulfilling prophecy and stereotyping*".

This is particularly prevalent when individuals choose to create their own identity and express themselves and challenge society's view on certain issues. It is so much more convenient to label someone a 'freak' and banish them to the outposts of our minds than to take on the challenge that their creative expression might pose. Although one can investigate myriad examples, I shall discuss a few key examples as to not over-labour the point.

## Sex versus Gender

This article investigates sexual identity as one of its key points, but before discussing sexual identity in more detail, it is important to draw a clear differentiation between sex and gender.

According to Judith Butler in her book *Gender Trouble*, sex is biological and prediscursive, while gender is culturally constructed. In her introduction of the central idea Butler argues that gender is performative: no identity exists behind the acts that supposedly "express" gender, and these acts constitute – rather than express – the illusion of the stable gender identity. Furthermore, if the appearance of "being" a gender is thus an effect of culturally influenced acts, then there exists no solid, universal gender: constituted through the practice of performance, the gender "woman" (like the gender "man") remains contingent and open to interpretation and "resignification". In this way, Butler provides an opening for subversive action. She calls for gender trouble, for people to trouble the categories of gender through performance.

For Butler, "*heterosexual melancholy is culturally instituted as the price of stable gender identities*" and for heterosexuality to remain stable, it demands the notion of homosexuality, which remains prohibited but necessarily within the bounds of culture. Finally, Butler points again to the productivity of the incest taboo, a law which generates – and also regulates – approved heterosexuality and subversive homosexuality, neither of which exists before the law.

In *Bodily Inscriptions, Performative Subversions*, Butler begins by questioning the notion that "*the body*" itself is a natural entity that "*admits no genealogy*", a usual given without

explanation: *"How are the contours of the body clearly marked as the taken-for-granted ground or surface upon which gender signification are inscribed, a mere facticity devoid of value, prior to significance?"*. Building on the thinking of Mary Douglas outlined in her *Purity and Danger*, Butler claims that the boundaries of the body have been drawn to instate certain taboos about limits and possibilities of exchange. Thus the hegemonic and homophobic press has read the pollution of the body that AIDS brings about as corresponding to the pollution of the homosexual's sexual activity, in particular his crossing the forbidden bodily boundary of the perineum. In other words, Butler's claim is that *"The body is itself a consequence of taboos that render that body discrete by virtue of its stable boundaries"*. Butler proposes the practice of drag as a way to destabilize the exteriority/interiority binary, finally to poke fun at the notion that there is an "original" gender, and to demonstrate playfully to the audience, through an exaggeration, that all gender is in fact scripted, rehearsed, and performed. Butler offers parody (for example, the practice of drag) as a way to destabilize and make apparent the invisible assumptions about gender identity and the inhabitability of such *"ontological locales"* as gender. By redeploying those practices of identity and exposing as always failed the attempts to "become" one's gender, Butler believes that a positive, transformative politics can emerge.

## Defining sexual identity

According to squidoo.com, a person's sexual identity defines their limits, boundaries and flexibility as a sexual being. It has three essential components:

- *Desire: the (mostly uncontrollable) feelings a person has towards sexual activities and the people/material that person wants to share the activities with,*
- *Behaviour: the actual sexual activities the person engages in, whether these activities were desired or not,*
- *Identity: the definition that the person consciously assigns to their sexuality.*

If we then look further a field, we find an interesting parallel between sexuality and identity. In Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* volume titled *The Will of Knowledge*, Foucault questions the "repressive hypothesis", the widespread belief that we have, particularly since the nineteenth century, "repressed" our natural sexual drives. He shows that what we think of as "repression" of sexuality actually constituted sexuality as a core feature of our identities, and produced a proliferation of discourse on the subject.

## Defining Homosexual Identity

According to the "End Homophobia" campaign, Sexual identity has been defined for many of us as being either gay or straight and determined by the extent of our physical sexual contact with either women or men. Despite the continuum proposed by Dr. Kinsey, and the option for identifying as bisexual, most people still define sexual identity as the choice of having sexual intercourse with the same or opposite gender. This offers a limited view on identity and boxes

people into one of three options (as opposed to two). But, should identity be viewed so simplistically? Is this over-simplification not exactly what we should be guarding against?

## The Kinsey Scale

In the 1940's and 1950's, after extensive research, Alfred Kinsey and his associates proposed a seven-point scale of sexual behaviour to make sense of the data he had collected on homosexuality. Through questionnaires and interviews with over ten thousand people, Kinsey discovered that one-third of the men he surveyed had experienced homosexual encounters to orgasm as adults and that forty-six percent of the men surveyed were neither exclusively homosexual nor exclusively heterosexual.

To equate a person's identity with whomever he/she has an orgasm with is not only inaccurate but also discriminatory and over-simplistic. This also does not really answer the question of a person's sexual identity accurately as it ignores the human being's cognitive abilities, etc.

Although the topic of homosexual identity is a complex one, it has polarised activists, theorists, and literary critics into two primary camps: essentialists and constructionists.

According to Donald E. Hall *"The former (usually labelled "essentialist" by their detractors rather than embracing the term themselves) believe that the lesbian and gay sense of "self" is natural, fundamental, and historically constant. Often arguing from a biological, psychological, or other scientific basis, the essentialists emphasize the transhistorical similarities in the experiences of men and women attracted to members of the same sex.*

*Constructionists, on the other hand, often utilising methodologies of critical theory, philosophy, economics, and historicism, argue that constructions of identity, whether heterosexual or homosexual, are historically contingent, that homosexuality as it is understood today came into being only in the late nineteenth century, and that prior manifestations of same-sex desire were vastly different from what we today call the gay and lesbian experience of self-hood. Constructionists constitute a much more self-conscious movement than do the essentialists. Nevertheless, the two camps, with few exceptions, share a common desire: to demonstrate the fundamental amorality of sexual orientation and sexual identity.*

*Although drawing on vastly different traditions and theories and beginning with very distinct assumptions, proponents of both constructionist and essentialist theories have produced valuable insights into gay and lesbian lives, ones that can contribute usefully to our understanding of the gay and lesbian literary heritage.*

*Similarly, some individuals have embraced the notion of a vaguely defined "queer" identity as a less restrictive, yet still oppositional, strategy for self-identification. Such "queerness" would allow social and political ties between lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transgressive heterosexuals, all of whom reject narrow notions of sexual conventionality.*

*But these attempts to move beyond a binary system of gender and orientational identification will inevitably trouble many, for seemingly basic to humanness is the need to claim affiliation as*

*we shift to some larger group at least some of the responsibility for determining the parameters of self-representation, patterns of behaviour, and beliefs.*

*Although Virginia Woolf's title character in Orlando may alter sexual identities in a relatively effortless way, few individuals seem capable of such transition. In fact, lesbians and gays may need to define themselves, whether through constructionist or essentialist models, in order to feel positive and healthy about desires that are still reviled and stigmatised by much of society.*

*In Woman on the Edge of Time, Marge Piercy envisions a future society that has moved beyond strict notions of gender and orientation, but such freedom seems very distant from our politicised world of restrictive rules and narrow strategies for countering those rules”.*

It is also important to differentiate between 'Queer' vs. 'Gay' identity as these two terms are often incorrectly used interchangeably.

The word 'Queer' is defined as:

**(adj) queer·er, queer·est.**

1. *Deviating from the expected or normal; strange: a queer situation.*
2. *Odd or unconventional, as in behaviour; eccentric.*
3. *Of a questionable nature or character; suspicious.*
4. *Slang. Fake; counterfeit.*
5. *Feeling slightly ill; queasy.*
6. *Offensive Slang. Homosexual.*

According to Family Pride Canada, **Gay identity** is defined as: “...*the personal condition or biographical fact of being gay either in the "essentialist" sense that one recognizes in oneself an innate quality of gayness essential to selfhood or self-definition yet common to all gay people; or in the "constructionist" sense that one self-identifies as a member of an historically specific gay community through a self-fashioning act of coming out. In the rhetoric of Gay Liberation, the term is bound up with the idea of “identity politics”, which entails the use of an identity (in this case, a sexual identity) as a means of arguing for political power, social recognition, cultural legitimacy, usually in the form of increased rights”.*

‘Queer’ does therefore not necessarily equate to sexual identity, in particular homosexual identity. According to Ross Horsley “*Queer theory offers a more fluid definition of identity. Since gender is a role that is played, sexuality is an unlimited performance that does not define us but simply expresses us at any particular time. One's sexual activities need not describe one as heterosexual, homosexual or bisexual. The intention is to liberate; we no longer need to force ourselves into rigid frameworks”.*

But what do contemporary artists make of this? How do they view social- versus individual identity and its expression? How do they see their role in this debate?

**Interview with South African Artist, Lincoln Theo**

Lincoln's body is a work of art in progress. He is both artist and artwork at the same time, and aims to challenge society's views on masculine identity by confronting the viewer, any viewer, not only the art lover in his/her 'safety' of a confined gallery space, but in everyday situations.

Theo holds a BA; LLB; and M Soc. Sci. (African Studies) from the University of Cape Town, South Africa. He is also a PhD Candidate (Women's & Gender Studies Dept, UWC) and an Attorney of the High Court of South Africa (CPD) (non-practising).

The author interviewed him with a view on shedding light on his views on identity and the role of art and the artist in the expression of identity:

**Do you think one's gender is determined by anatomy only (i.e. gender is determined by one's male/female anatomy), or is it more complex?  
Please elaborate...**

*No, I think gender and sex are two different things. Sex is primarily identified by biology, but the common understanding of sex as a binary (i.e. one is either male or female) is wrong, as evidenced by intersex people and that people can transition from one to the other.*

*In terms of sex, I don't believe that anyone is born with a specific sex, just one that is more or less associated with the sex of male or female (a cock and a pussy are both undifferentiated early in human development, and only become one or the other in relation to genetic and biological drives. And in fact (according to Judith Butler, whose work I agree with) sex itself is a construct. We socially and culturally differentiated ourselves in to male and female, and read our sex in terms of that distinction ex post facto. In other words, gender created sex, not the other way round. There is no logical reason why we can't be something other than male or female, say a third option, or somewhere on a continuum between the two.*

*As for gender, I think gender is completely socially and culturally defined. In fact, the words 'male' and 'female' create those ideas rather than describe them. There is very little of real difference between the genders, beyond what is socially prescribed or proscribed.*

*The rest has no real function, other than to let people feel differentiated. And how mundane a distinction. So, half the population self-identifies as male, the other half as female. So, 3 billion people self-identify similarly to any given person. Hardly makes for individuality or distinctiveness or being 'special'. In fact, we're all special because we are who we are, not because we're part of a particular gender/sex!*

**How do you define 'identity' in your work?**

*Identity is about identification, or non-identification. It is a personal thing. We all associate ourselves with certain cultural and social norms. Most of us do so unconsciously and in relation to how we were brought up (for example, how else do we account for different religions being predominant in specific geographic locations rather than evenly spaced all over the world? If they were really all adopted on their own merit, they would be evenly distributed, statistically relative to the number of them). So identity is not a 'thing', but an emotional connection made with certain physical representations of archetypal frameworks.*

*We all have a rather troubled relationship with the material world. On the one hand we're mortally aware that we only live for a certain time, yet we think (hope) that there is something beyond physicality. So, we associate ourselves with certain social, cultural and psychological representations of 'reality' (which is really just as nebulous as the many ways we can conceive of it) in order to 'cement' ourselves into our physical lives. In this way we 'cement' ourselves into identities, thinking that we can each be only one thing. But we really are performing our realities and identities every minute of our lives, making minute choices about who/what/how we identify with other people who we in turn perceive to be static and immutable. And in turn we are constantly changing our 'identities' in minute ways depending on who we're dealing with, how we want to be perceived, what we want out of the interaction, and what we're thinking. Which in turn means that we can consciously change our identities by looking another way, turning away from the social and psychological spaces we habitually turn towards. But this isn't a completely conscious process, because we need to remain true to our unconsciousness, so it is a dialectical process whereby we interact with our lives and challenge and rework who we 'are' and always in so doing are 'in process' of 'becoming', rather than 'being' (as a static thing).*

*So in relation to my work, this all means that there is no reason I should restrict myself to an identity 'imposed' from the outside. I'd rather find identifications that work with my various (and they really are varied) tendencies, and apply them in a way that works in a kind of homeostasis or balance for me, individually, but individually in society.*

**Your work seems primarily focused on challenging society's notions about gender identity. What are your views on this?**

*I think gender is perhaps the most rigid (yet ultimately incomprehensible and impossible to unpack into its constituent parts) 'identity'.*

*This is also connected to the expected 'inviolability' of the human body (i.e. people are really freaked out by the idea of my voluntarily having a boob job and 'invading' my body in that way). Actually, my work is about exploring the inconsistencies of what people assume to be stable categories in general, of gender, class, race, national identity etc. The gender aspect is just the most visible, given the prevailing consciousness on other levels.*

**How do you view minority identity?**

*In a perfect world there would be no 'majority' identity, and therefore no 'minority' identity. And particularly in the context of 'alternative' identity, there is very little that connects the identities of people who simply identify with what is 'not majority'.*

**Is there such a thing as a 'Gay' Artist?**

*There are two kinds of artists in this context. The first is 'gay', who self-identifies as gay, and therefore accepts and welcomes the various parts of the socially accepted gay identities. The second is 'queer', who is just 'otherwise', and doesn't necessarily have to be sexually attracted him/her/itself to a member of the same gender, but may be merely reflecting on issues of sexual orientation.*

*A queer artist is one who refuses to identify as any particular person, or adopts alternative identities and focuses on issues pertaining to social concerns that are in contradistinction to generally accepted notions of gender, sexual orientation, class, race etc.*

**Do you believe that an artist should be associated mainly according to their minority identity, i.e. a Gay or Jewish Artist, or rather an artist focusing on gay and/or Jewish issues?**

*Some people (artists) need to process their own circumstances in their own ways, and do so through their art. It doesn't matter what they choose to do, it's a personal thing, and nobody should have the right to pigeon-hole them, unless they choose, for a particular time in their lives, to choose the identity/ies.*

*The expressions of opinion inherent in art are not the identities of the artist or the focus of that artist. They are just the feelings of the artist. So the artist should not be pigeonholed into either option.*

**In your opinion, what is the role of art in assisting society's understanding of identity?**

*...Face it, the ordinary person is really, really dull and uninspired! So the role of art is to liven things up and give people things to think about.*

**Should art always be a political tool? (I.e. challenge the viewer/audience).**

*Art isn't inherently political. Some artists make it so. Maybe because they are (understandably and justifiably) angry with the banality and mediocrity of consensus reality and the things that pass in popular culture for ingenuity and integrity and creativity and social comment. (Yes, I am one of those artists). But the role of art is to engender and encompass all kinds of alternative views of things. Either inside views (so others can understand the world inside the artist a bit better, and the viewer can see things about themselves they wouldn't otherwise do) or outside (so the viewer can see the world from a different perspective and thereby contextualise their own lives in a different way).*

*The world's a fuck-up, and to my mind it's all because people are so wedded to the 'ways things have been' that they refuse to look at how things could be. The problem is that one can't legislate intelligence; one just has to try to create an environment in which people CHOOSE to think. And one of the things one can do that is to face them with what they haven't thought of before, and hope that they will find means of making real. THAT is the function of (some forms of) art. To make people uncomfortable and maybe to help generate the very idea of an alternative in their own lives, and thereby hopefully on a grand scale.*

**What is Gay Art?**

*Further investigation on this topic has lead to some key thoughts on the topic of 'Gay Art'. According to John Perreault "One idea is that it is art done by gay artists on gay subjects for other gay people. Although this may be a necessary first step, I find it separatist and far too accepting of the ghetto".*

Nelson Hendricks, however, felt that: *“I don’t think that there is such a thing as gay art. But I believe that gays, like people of colour and other minority groups have a different perspective on society and the world, one that gives them a clearer view of the dominant culture and the mass media. They occupy a radically different subjective position”*.

*The Gay Body*, an exhibition curated by Karl-Gilbert Murray investigates this matter in more detail: In the exhibition Murray states that: *“To exhibit the gay body is to take a position: this is a political act, of course, but also one that recognises and promotes awareness of a certain form of sensibility specific to gay artists. This recognition makes it possible to inscribe the gay body within the social landscape, and to specify the resonances of identity in the materiality of images that are set apart by appearing together in one and the same exhibition venue. These artists’ sensibility attests to their lucidity with respect to the social theatre, which they have acquired by playing several roles, by maintaining a distance in relation to them, in response to an ever-felt yet never articulated exclusion”*.

He continues: *“For some, the body serves as a platform from which to present their sexuality, and/or to express their desires. Others are interested in cross-dressing – an ultimate sign of marginality – as a way of foregrounding the facticity of the social values attached to sociosexual roles. Yet others raise questions about the stigmatisation of the gay body in those media that treat AIDS as a sign of the perversion of gay sexual practices and reinforce prejudices and stereotypes that contribute to homophobia. Some represent the gay body in terms of its erotic and sensual power, while others, in the hope of raising awareness, inscribe it within the structure of their art as a positive model of affirmation and sexual liberation. For still others, the body attests to daily life practices within which the community model and couple relationships further the recognition of shared affinities. Whether active or passive participants in this community, gay artists express themselves by proposing their sexuality as a locus for learning and communicating real experience, all the while critiquing media-promulgated stereotypes, which they dispute, reject or adopt”*.

The above-mentioned exhibition looks at several examples, but only a few are discussed below:

***The Transvestite*** by David Rasmus

***Legacy (Andy)***

David Rasmus shows men in wigs and make-up, and in so doing illustrates that identity is created. Like Lincoln Theo and Steven Cohen, Rasmus blurs the gender identity boundaries to challenge the viewer’s notions on identity.

According to Murray *“Cross-dressing participates in the objectification of the body as a signifier of social and cultural prescriptions, and encourages the metamorphosis of the body on behalf of a more adequate self-definition as an individual”*.



David Rasmus  
*Legacy (Andy)*, 1993, photography

***Mona*** by Marcus Leatherdale

Marcus Leatherdale challenges the viewer's perception and reinterprets Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* by using a male model in his version of *Mona*, and again challenges the viewer's gender notions opening the door for stereotyping and prejudice.



Marcus Leatherdale  
*Mona*, 1985, photography

***Indigo Boy*** by Chris Diedericks

*"If one has no scars, one becomes blind in the next world, but perhaps the man without scars is blind also in the imaginative world".*

Robert Bly from *Iron John*.

South African artist, Chris Diedericks explores and challenges modern day masculine identity, especially sexual identity, in his *Indigo Boy* Exhibition. Post-Apartheid South Africa is still largely patriarchal, and gender roles are quite often still as rigid as before the advent of human rights in the 'New' South Africa. A key difference, however, is that one can now freely challenge these archaic notions, and Diedericks does exactly that in *Indigo Boy*.

According to Annali Cabano-Dempsey, Arts Curator: University of Johannesburg Art Gallery *"Like the indigo child, Diedericks challenges meta-narratives of contemporary society in his new web-based art work entitled Ragazzo dell'Indaco (Indigo Boy), 2006-2007, in post-modern tradition. His exploration of men and masculinity largely inspired by Robert Bly's Iron John, celebrates diversity and honours minorities and the marginalised. He does not purport to provide the answers of truth and reality, rather finding questions and processes of importance and preferring the open-endedness of the final work"*.

Diedericks finds the need to box people's sexual identity problematic as he firmly believes that no person can explain heterosexuality or homosexuality completely: *"Some men love women, other men love men; this phenomenon is as old as the human race. Why should we try to find reasons or labels for what seems to be such a natural part of life? Some heterosexual men are very effeminate and some gay men are very masculine. It is extremely dangerous in this day and age to assume any man's sexuality.*

*Young men seem a lot less threatened by the labels attached to gender and sexual identity and are also more willing to experiment with both sexes. Maybe we are finally overcoming our outdated Victorian paranoia about boxes, labels and assigned places"*.

As part of the body of work Diedericks further explores free thinkers within contemporary South African society, but does not limit his search to the 'usual' intellectual bourgeoisie.

One such free thinker is Leonard (aka 'Poes' (*Cunt*)). According to Diedericks, Leonard interests him so much because *"Leonard is not afraid to tackle any holy cow by the udder; he is brave enough to live completely outside any constrictive norms; challenging society (and himself) daily. He is incredibly disobedient, and finds himself often in trouble (especially at Bob's Bar) in Cape Town, where the mostly heterosexual clientele, will be by his side almost immediately. I am so intrigued by the ways in which society view free individuals such as Lenny, I am more and more convinced it is mostly quiet jealousy.*

*Most people are afraid of blunt honesty; they wear masks every day and live in the shadows. Not Lenny, the "Poes", he is living out loud. Lenny is a red-blooded wild man"*.

## Confronting Jewish-Gay Identity

*"It is better to be hated for what you are than to be loved for what you are not"*.

André Gide

The issue of identity becomes even more complex when a Jewish person also happens to be homosexual. Will he/she firstly identify with their Jewish (social/group) identity, and then their homosexual identity or vice versa or neither, i.e. their own individual identity that is influenced by their Jewish- and Gay identity, but is not defined by it?

Both Gay and Jewish people were persecuted during the Second World War, and institutionalised homophobia is still rife in society today. Many people are still persecuted whether explicitly or implicitly: According to Ruth Johnson: *"In the film Europa Europa, based on the autobiography of Salomon Perel, the film traces the succession of masquerades assumed by the hero in order to survive the Holocaust. In so doing, the film delineates the epistemological space of the Jewish closet and reveals its structural affinities with the gay closet. That is, the incoherence of Jewish difference serve to establish its analogy with gay*

*identity, and, paradoxically, the visible stigma of circumcision transforms the relation of the closets from one of analogy into one of “masked repetition”.*

During WWII the SS assigned pink triangles to those concentration camp prisoners convicted on charges of homosexual behaviour (as opposed to the Star of David worn by Jewish prisoners). They were remanded to the camps with or without court proceedings, or after having already served their court-imposed prison sentences.

They were therefore ‘branded’ in such a way that they had no choice but to be associated with the minority group identity. Their personal identity was therefore nullified before the law and broader society as they had already been labelled by the Naziregime.

### **Expressing minority Gay/Jewish identity**

*“You can preach a better sermon with your life than with your lips”.*

Oliver Goldsmith

South African artist, Steven Cohen’s work is focused on confronting issues around his Jewish and Gay identities. Artthrob.co.za described Cohen’s work as follows: *“Best known for his live performances, Cohen appears not only on stage and in galleries but also, uninvited, in public spaces. His work deals with outsider identity, using his own and others’ bodies to create ‘living art’ that references sculpture, contemporary dance, drag and performance art... His outrageously provocative performances at public events are designed to force his viewers into recognizing him and ultimately accepting him for what he is: a Jewish faggot. Beyond the personal, his work is a call for the recognition of all those outside the confines of straight society”.*

In an interview with Brenda Atkinson of the *Mail and Guardian* in August 1997, Cohen stated that: *“I’m messing with a society that is more shocked by the violence of my selfpresentation as monster/queer/unrepresentable or whatever than by the actual violence they live with every day...”*

Cohen always confronts his audience and forces them to take an active stance, forcing them to form an opinion. His approach seems to mock, challenge and rejects the labelling or social reaction theory outright. His identity is therefore first and foremost that of the outsider (Jewish-Gay Performance Artist), but like most artists, should not and cannot be boxed in.

For artists like Steven Cohen, Chris Diedericks and Lincoln Theo challenging identity norms and beliefs is a constant challenge, especially in a country that is still in the process of constructing its post-Apartheid identity. But this also offers them a wonderful opportunity to influence South African society’s views on identity through their work.

Poet, artist, playwright and novelist E.E. Cummings, (1894-1962) aptly noted that *“To be nobody-but-yourself — in a world which is doing its best, night and day, to make you everybody else — means to fight the hardest battle which any human being can fight; and never stop fighting”.*

## In conclusion

*“Unlike a drop of water which loses its identity when it joins the ocean, man does not lose his being in the society in which he lives. Man's life is independent. He is born not for the development of the society alone, but for the development of his self”.*

B.R. Ambedkar

It is clear that the issue of identity is a minefield to anyone searching for the expression of his or her identity. Minority identity has always been under pressure, and although we like to think that we live in a free society in the West, it might still be far from the practical truth. Rabbi Bernard aptly stated that *“Homophobia and Anti-Semitism are part of the same disease”*. Labelling and boxing identities seems to be the real disease as it isolates and discriminates unfairly. It is often argued that the broader society we live in (the ‘majority’) is largely to blame for the confused identity beliefs, but this should not be used as an excuse to hide behind to avoid living and expressing one’s true identity.

There seems to be a trend towards ‘normalising’ minority groups like the Jewish and GBLT Communities via the arts. This includes film and television: recent examples include films like *Brokeback Mountain*, or television series like *Will and Grace*, etc. In one of post-Apartheid South Africa’s more popular soap-operas, *Egoli, Place of Gold*, there is even a gay couple who are adopting a baby, taking gay life as a ‘normal’ part of everyday life right into the living rooms of millions of everyday people on a daily basis.

But do these examples not merely illustrate that society might be ready to accept a third boxed identity? We are still a long way away from a truly tolerant society that understands and respects the fact that someone can be separate but equal irrespective of his or her identity. Is it therefore not of key importance for artists to keep challenging society’s perceptions about identity?

Borrowing from the world of business thinking, in *The 5th Discipline*, Peter Senge’s writings on Systems Thinking, Senge states: *“...it is systems that ultimately condition human behaviour and thinking conditions the system. If one wants to affect behaviour, one must change thinking, which will affect the connections and dynamics of the system.*

*Even then, the system will only change behaviour for good (temporally and morally), if it has clear purpose”.*

Should the artist in contemporary society not therefore challenge our systems thinking, even if it makes us uncomfortable? Are artists not the instigators who nudge us toward the unknown, or should they also join the ‘great unwashed’ and rather roll over and play dead, or maybe hide behind picket fences of prejudice and judgement in the Republic of Ignorance?

Advanced civilisations are measured according to their levels of tolerance and mutual respect. Societies that allow and respect their artists to challenge their views of identity, instead of boxing and chastising them are the truly evolved societies.

If our society celebrated identity in all its variations, we could imagine children and adults expressing their identity in many ways, and we could imagine that these feelings, thoughts, and

behaviours might change over a lifetime. Young children do actually explore their sexuality and individual identity with some degree of freedom. But our society and the sub-cultures in which we live impose standards for sexual conduct that influence how we think and feel about our sexuality, and, especially, how we behave.

It is therefore imperative that we reject the notion that there is one 'true' identity but rather move towards the idea that society consists of an agglomeration of identifications.

The End Homophobia Campaign states that: *"We look forward to a society in which we celebrate the presence of many sexual identities. Especially from people who consider themselves progressive, we ask for an affirmation of the various ways that people choose to identify themselves as sexual beings, regardless of political or social necessity. We want to celebrate sexuality in the face of oppression, instead of reacting to oppression by limiting our options"*.

Individual gender identities can, and should, operate within broader 'group' identity systems, and should be celebrated, not smothered by ignorance and narrowmindedness.

The question remains: where does creative expression stand on this matter?

Should it focus on the minority group identity in order to create a dialogue and understanding within the broader community through shock techniques, or is it up to each artist to decide for himself how he/she wants to position themselves within the artistic community?

Giving birth to oneself; to one's own unique identity; is often a long and painful process. And although the artist challenges our comfort zones and tries – knowingly or unknowingly- to force our own identities out of hiding, the artist must first and foremost be true to his/her own identity: for there is nothing more convincing and commendable than someone heeding the calling of their inner voice. Before the artist can hold up a mirror to society, he/she must first make peace with his or her own reflection in that mirror.

*"My mother said to me, 'If you become a soldier, you'll be a general; if you become a monk, you'll end up as the Pope'. Instead, I became a painter and wound up as Picasso".*

Pablo Picasso

Thys de Beer, July 2008

Cape Town, South Africa

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