

Portrait

By
Ingrid Luquet-Gad

Today, everyone, everything, quickly becomes an image for consumption. Some are creating strategies of how to expand and flatten these effects, squatting in the dominant cis universe, making themselves into exuberant, multiple, viral creatures hell bent on flooding the identity machines.

The
Disappeavers

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Thomas
Cap de Ville
Vava Dudu
Sin Wai Kin
Jenkin van
Zyl

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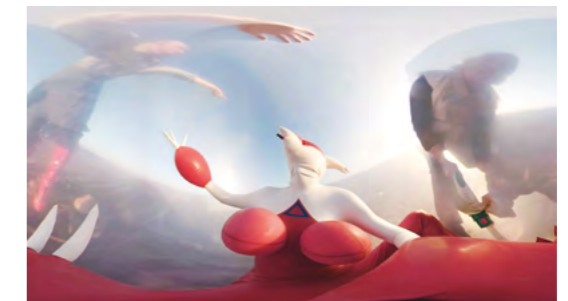
You can't stick two fingers up the system if the system itself has become invisible. While its effects are perceptible, the origins remain hidden. Ever greater hegemonic powers have now infiltrated the chatroom: obscured, they operate through dematerialised flux, information has become coded life. In retrospect, the identity wars of the late 2010s increasingly appear as a decoy, drawing the debate towards a dubious visibility: what we look at is but the light emitted by a star before its destruction, now reaching us delayed, its radiant glow concealing the very forces who would have us to take a stand, and why.

As a result, the crucial task of developing techniques to make oneself unaccounted for are lagging behind. If you are representable, then you are likely prey, and the degree of your visibility might be inversely proportionate to your level of freedom. More than a decade ago, media theorists Alexander Galloway and Eugene Thacker described our current era as one of "universal standards of identifications", one where "referencing technologies [...] bind identification with locatability, such as biometrics and GPS." In their book, *The*

Exploit: A Theory of Networks (2007), they formulated a call for strategic disappearance, one that would evacuate the spaces of (reproductive) power, concluding that, "future avant-garde practices will be those of nonexistence."

For artistic practice, this means reopening an old Pandora's box: a debate not only about the terms of mimesis, but also about the questions of critique and autonomy. An artist is no theoretician or hacktivist. Artists are assigned to the regime of the visible no matter what they do. They have no "dark forest" to escape into, which, at present, is probably already full of tech-bros and e-girls anyway. Theirs (artists) is a murkier task, one involved in a more nuanced blurring of identity-as-image, and the intrinsic perils of reification and commodification that come with it. As they are forced to wade in these troubled waters, they can still devise oblique strategies to refuse the initial impulses of a given power structure, rather than simply twitching and jolting to its every command. Instead of pushing up against the boundaries, it is perhaps possible to ignore them altogether, and stubbornly take up a space, any space.

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Stills from Jenkin van Zyl, *Looners*, 2019

Jenkin van Zyl

Jenkin van Zyl is an artist and filmmaker who shows a subtle awareness of this calculated refusal. At first glance, van Zyl might seem like a younger, European (and thus, more *bagarreur*) sibling of artist duo Lizzie Fitch and Ryan Trecartin. With them, he shares a liking for grandiose, Wagnerian movie-sets, prosthetic silicone attire, and hyper-accelerated pop-culture tropes. For his best-known film *Looners*, commissioned for Hayward Gallery's 2019 group-show "Kiss My Gender", van Zyl set his plot in the former *Game of Thrones* set in the barren Atlas Mountains. There, monstrous inflatable creatures, grotesquely campy and abject, enact a queered simulacrum of masculinist big budget action movies. Van Zyl's

protagonists are all clones, only types, never individuated. Blind predatory power is voraciously eating itself. In grim, cavernous spaces assembled from the debris and detritus of film and theatre sets, subterranean club backrooms merge with survivalist steampunkish bunkers. The old world goes down in flames, in spurts of goeey fake blood and cancerous fumes of plastic-based chemicals. Currently at work on *In Vitro*, a new film to be presented at Glasgow International, van Zyl's own persona, as documented on his Instagram account, or in a recent episode of Vogue's "Extreme Beauty" make-up tutorials, he dons exuberant theatrical costumes to be worn in daily life. Often, he forgets to take off his silicon horns to sleep – sleep itself is overrated – and biorhythms should be hacked too.

This is neither costume nor drag:
 he casually wears a
 full-blown
 Satanist Michelin Man outfit
 to museum outings, or when going to
 feed the ducks.



Still from *Inside Jenkin van Zyl's Extreme Beauty Routine*, Vogue, 2020



Still from Jenkin van Zyl, *Machines Of Love*, 2020

This is neither costume nor drag: he casually wears a full-blown Satanist Michelin Man outfit to museum outings, or when going to “feed the ducks”.

As van Zyl avoids market-driven pink-washed spaces of self-tokenisation, he reconnects with a previous tradition of disidentification. Already in 1999, the late queer theorist Jose Esteban Muñoz posited the disidentifying subject as one who does not assimilate nor reject, identify nor counter-identify, but “tactically and simultaneously works on, with, and against, a cultural form”. For him, however, liminal spaces,

such as clubs and chatrooms, could still point to better collective futures. Van Zyl's own counter-spaces – abandoned film scenery, and claustrophobic dungeons – read as post-industrial, serotonin-depleted dead ends. As eternal recursive feedback loops hinder our faith in a future, or even in an outside, van Zyl focuses on the decaying public sphere: streets, cultural icons, and the social media scene at large. Knowing full well that visibility is a trap, every one of his images is like a suicide bomb, burning a gaping hole through the texture of the real.



Vava Dudu

Photo: Marie Rouge

Vava Dudu

Parisian polymorph Vava Dudu similarly repurposes the spaces of visibility she encounters. Her work is infectious and auto-generative, spreading by iteration and variation. Like a self-replicating cell, or an infectious malware, it covers every surface while remaining attached to none. Growing up in Paris in the early seventies to parents from Martinique, she quickly rose to prominence in the fashion world with her upcycled pieces: a first designer job for Jean-Paul Gaultier in 1997 led to her winning the prestigious ANDAM prize after teaming up with costume designer Fabrice Lorrain. Remaining affixed to no particular milieu (she prefers the word extremes; milieu in French means both a social environment and “middle”), she quickly added music to her arc, as a member of

electro-punk-zouk-neo-wave group La Chatte (Pussy) since 2003. It is poetry above all, though, which through drawing and painting, stitching and lyrics, acts as a catalyst for her multifarious practice. A meta-layer of sorts, her phrases and symbols aim at spreading out over all possible surfaces.

Vava Dudu's name is both a brand and a stutter, like some of her catchphrases, erected as lyrics or sewn onto bomber jackets. Beginning in 2019, now back in Paris after having spent the past decade in Berlin, she could have been a punk, but knows that today, terms like destruction and disruption are mostly found on the moodboards of the creative industries. Working from the inside, through recent, short-lived collaborations with brands such as Courrèges and stylist Nicolas Lecourt Mansion, along with presentations at institutions such as Lafayette Anticipations and Musée



Photo: Torben Eskerod

Vava Dudu, *Poison*, wall of clothes, wallpaintings, drawing
Installation view, Overgaden, Copenhagen, 2015

d'Art Moderne in Paris, hers is a practice of intrusion and proliferation. Responding to the commodification of the self strewn across interfaces and signs, she appropriates this very process in order to render it illegible through a subjective, autotelic, semiotic code. Hand-drawn or stitched, phrases play on declination and word-play (“you RUN after / the trains / IN which / I’m NOT / If you like / Me / Make Love / to Me / If you DON’T / like Me leave / me alone”), intertwined with proliferating symbols and overlapping graphic elements: a heart acts as a third eye, a pair of erect breasts become mountains, manicured fingers enter and exit open holes, covering every imaginable layer – notebook, body, clothing, discursive space – not unlike the repetitive act of graffiti, though writing here is just one of many possible media.

Deterritorialised and collectivised, skin is no longer an attribute of a finite entity, but a ductile layer emanating from a collective organism named Vava Dudu, which will

move over, but not metabolise, any subject or object it encounters. For her chosen family, this acts as an identification sign, and for the outside, as a razzle-dazzle camouflage of sorts. In her exhibitions, the artist presents her drawings as a grid, on fabrics that serves as a scenic prop or hanger for her garments – always one-off editions – affixed to the wall like a painting. The works’ status, however, remains ambiguous: one of her best-known recent pieces from 2017, *Sans titre (secu)*, consists of two jackets, one black and one red, divided into two parts, on one side the relic of a security uniform, on the other, a punk-communist starred item, sewn together through loose stitches, embroidered with Dudu’s fragmentary phrases. When presented in shows, they signal that no amount of money will grant you access. They hang like abandoned artifacts, whereas if worn, rumour has it they would secure you a spot on the guestlist of the infamous Cocktail D’Amore party in Berlin, where Dudu used to be a regular.

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Vava Dudu, *Untitled (Rity)*, 2017, two halves “Bombers” parts assembled, embroidery, inscription



Vava Dudu, *Untitled (rosé)*, 2017
Drawing on rosé cotton sheet, 77 x 56 cm



Vava Dudu, *Profound Vertigo*, 2017
Drawing on red cotton sheet, 77 x 56 cm

Photos: Philippe Munda

Reproduction and repetition, those central attributes of normative power – of any archy, really – can be repurposed by adding ephemeral layers on top of a fixed standard. By fully merging with a given context, this allows you to supersede the fixity of an individual carnal envelope (a body) to morph into a transient exterior.

In her essay “Seeing Gender” (1995), writer Kathy Acker describes her attempt to see her body, and in doing so, tries to avoid “the Platonic model of generation”, where “both the father and the child, the image of the father, possess the ability to repeat themselves.” A body cannot exist outside its patriarchal definitions, she asserts, but it does not necessarily need to be material: a body can be language, provided language

is not mimetic. Therefore, as she writes in *Literal Madness* (1988), language is more important than meaning: “don’t make anything out of broken-up syntax cause you’re looking to make meaning where nonsense will.” Like Acker’s figure of choice, Vava Dudu is a pirate. She’s also a Medusa – daring you to stare back – repeatedly writing, over and over again: “You did not respond to my gaze.”

To be everywhere and nowhere at once, to remain attached to no scene, no medium, no location, no middle (*milieu*), qualifies as a strategy aimed at escaping the normative gaze binding identity to authenticity – on the web 2.0, avatars are not welcome. Self-dispersal, more than self-erasure, is the preferred path to self-actualisation.



Sin Wai Kin, *A Dream of Wholeness in Parts*, 2021
Video, 4K, sound, 23:03 min.

Courtesy: Soft Opening, London

From
Jessica Rabbit
to
Marilyn Monroe
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Sin Wai Kin

Like van Zyl and Vava Dudu, London-based Canadian artist Sin Wai Kin, formerly known as Victoria Sin, operates in several spheres at once, careful to remain both inside and outside of art institutions, as they navigate between immersive drag performances, speculative fiction, zine publishing (*Dream Babes*), and more recently, music writing and performance, appearing on Korean-American house producer Yaeji's last album *What We Drew*. 우리가 그려왔던 By bringing drag artistry to the art world and performing a hypertrophied femininity – the tall, white, busty blonde Hollywood archetype – from Jessica Rabbit to Marilyn Monroe and, more recently, tropes drawn from Peking and Cantonese opera, the artist themselves take on an ambiguous approach to visibility.

When appearing in an art context, such as the 58th Venice Biennale in 2019, or at the Serpentine Pavilion's Park

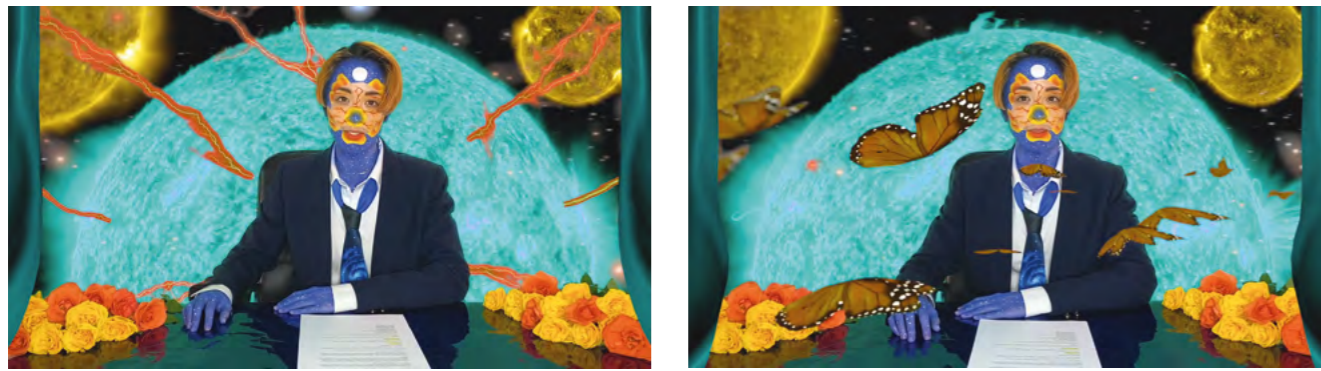
Nights program a year before, the emphasis lies squarely on process. As Sin Wai Kin put on a gender type, only to take it off again, they present their make-up wipes as a relic of the careful labour of constructing femininity. Only in the process of construction and deconstruction can the artist conceal themselves, the end result perpetually delayed. While all is given, nothing of it can be fixed for good in a single frame – what remains is but rhinestoned slough. In their new film, *A Dream of Wholeness in Parts* (2021), the first work created under their new name, they further distance themselves from identity-as-image to focus on the deconstruction of language, especially the colonial act of naming in English. The work imagines a self-constructed narrative through a dreamy journey to a barren shore, as they perform daily corporeal tasks: ingesting a bowl of Wonton noodles in an act of liberating themselves from assigned genealogies to emerge from frothing waves like a Botticellian, non-Western post-Venus.



Sin Wai Kin, *Irreconcilable Differences*, 2020, Film still



Sin Wai Kin, *A View From Elsewhere, Act 1 Part 1, Tell me everything you saw and what you think it means*, 2018, Film still



Sin Wai Kin, *Today's Top Stories*, 2020, film stills

As Sin Wai Kin put on a gender type,
only to take it off again,
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as a relic of the careful labour
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Sin Wai Kin, *A Dream of Wholeness in Parts*, 2021
video, 4K, sound
23:03 min.

Courtesy: Soft Opening London

Thomas Cap de Ville

Lineages, even intellectual ones, attest to a patriarchal structure of knowledge-making, which is why Paris-based artist Thomas Cap de Ville has built his most recent shows around his own personal teenage ephemera collected through the nineties and noughties. A former make-up artist, now a photographer and music video producer, his shows at the project-space Goswell Road in Paris (2017 and 2019), and this spring at Confort Moderne in Poitiers, were built around a central body of work: book-objects that he names “psychophores”. Impossibly bulky, plastered in tape, their pages bulge with all kinds of trinkets and talismans: hair and teeth, personal photographs and club flyers, and in the most recent ones, collected ephemera from his close friend’s circle, as well as other artists, vague sexual encounters, childhood friends, and local scene fixtures. Almost sculptural in scale, his portable tumescent altars bear a weird resemblance to a queer, personal, and subcultural version of a Thomas Hirschhorn monument. In their joyful, deskilled materiality,

they posit a pendant to what scholar Sara Ahmed described for collective, feminist-queer and anti-racist projects, as an “unhappy archive”.

For Cap de Ville as well, image or art production detaches itself from the structures of representation: it operates as an endless act of self-replication, a way to produce the past out of the present. Covering the years 1996 to 2009, there are no indicators of time passing. These psychophores are a coming-into-identity relic, already in decay as they begin to emerge. In other words, no data can be extracted from them. The system won’t be fed any human capital today. If one wanted to give the system a finger, or two, or the whole hand, one would only be feeding the beast legible signs of dissent and help solidify arbitrary categories of identity. In 2021, you can still buy t-shirts with the slogan “Dismantle the patriarchy”, but if one has to stick with performative allyship for now, while awaiting the opportunity to render oneself fugitive for good, a better option would be: “Stop Making Sense”. Of this, all four artists decline radically heterogenic visions, planting toxic flamboyant seeds not outside, but amidst, the dominating cis apparatus.



Left and Right: Thomas Cap de Ville, *Untitled (book object)*, mixed media, 2019

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View of Thomas Cap de Ville, "Psychophores", 2021, Le Confort Moderne, Poitiers

Photos: Philippe Munda



Thomas Cap de Ville, *TCdV tarot*, Tarot cards, 19 x 12 cm



View of Thomas Cap de Ville, "Psychophores", 2021, Le Confort Moderne, Poitiers



Thomas Cap de Ville, *Book number 7*, 2021
Book, collage, drawings, Polaroids

THOMAS CAP DE VILLE was born in 1978 in Rochefort. He lives in Paris. Solo exhibitions have taken place at Confort Moderne, Poitiers (2020), and Goswell Road, Paris (2019, 2017).

VAVA DUDU was born in 1970 in Paris. She lives in Paris. Exhibitions have taken place at Villa Arson, Nice; Musée d'Art Moderne de la ville de Paris (both 2019); and Lafayette Anticipations, Paris (2018).

SIN WAI KIN (formerly Victoria Sin) was born in 1991 in Toronto. She lives in London. Solo exhibitions and performances have taken place at the International Photography Festival, Zagreb; Soft Opening, London (both 2020); Taipei Contemporary Art Centre (2018). She is represented by Cbi-Wen Gallery, Taipei.

JENKIN VAN ZYL was born in 1993 in Surrey, UK. He lives in London. Solo exhibitions of his work have taken place at Amanda Wilkinson Gallery, London (2020); and Horse Hospital, London (2019).

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