A Stylist of Subjectivities
Interface in the Photography of Iké Udé

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As the introductory image for her photo-journal 'What is Masculinity?', Carrie Mae Weems chose Iké Udé’s Self Portrait as a mock cover of GQ magazine from his Cover Girl photo series (1996–). Weems’ piece was among an anthology of essays entitled Constructed Masculinity, which interrogated the production and circulation of multiple masculine fictions informed by the mantra of race, class, sexuality and nationality, and in which Udé’s photograph functioned as a visual critique of the logic of constructed identities. In a lecture entitled ‘Representation, Media and the Theatre of Identity’, given at Hampshire College in connection with an exhibition of the Cover Girl series, Udé discussed identity as a performative theatre that is subject to change.

If Udé’s production is involved in the modification of masculinist principles and appearances, it may be understood in the light of one of Judith Butler’s questions in Gender Trouble: “what kind of subversive repetition might call into question the regulatory practices of identity itself?” Used as signs of problematising normative gender taxonomies, Udé’s photographs are also appropriated into a vast corpus of discourses which take up his work as signatures of their culturally, racially and sexually mapped spaces. Stepping up to the task of cultural critic, and serving as ‘poster boy’ for various discursive enterprises, Udé’s oeuvre suspends the specificity of the demands of these categorisations. The diverse appropriations of his work alone signal the images’ refusal of the logic of the stereotype. Udé’s strategy is perhaps to anticipate and not resist these totalising attachments. The repetition, the performance, to which Butler refers, gets translated by the artist as his images trek through thematic exhibitions on globalism, postmodernism, African art, African American art and performance art. Masquerading from rubric to rubric, his work seems to beg for the attentions of these various alliances as it aggressively denies any fixed affiliation. I will argue that in working within and between these cultural spaces, what gets called into question is identity politics itself. The work
engages in a performative enterprise that skews identificatory practices. Moreover, in considering Udé’s photography, one must decode his various negotiations in the production of an ideal transformable and untranslatable body.

In 1993 Udé began Project Rear. The artist posits the ass print in place of the finger print, the bum as bodily trace, as a mode of corporeal documentation and self portraiture. Udé is photographed holding his own ass print to his face in frontal stance. These images speak to parallel histories of photographing the body archivally in the construction of criminality, sexual pathology and racial aberrance. Moreover, a film of the same name is dedicated to the Hottentot Venus. The postmodernist and/or queer guise of Project Rear is overlaid by ethnographic discourse marked by Udé’s dedication to the figure of the Hottentot, “the mother of all asses”. The notion of imprint as identificatory marker, a depository of physical evidence, gets processed in blue, gold or black paint on the glossy surface of a toilet cover or metallic fold-up chair. This Duchampian gesture of ready-made and repetition is followed through the legacy of Sixties European avant-gardist Yves Klein, as the film shows Udé applying paint with brush onto the bodies of his sitters. The asses which are rendered in paint belong to the likes of Lyle Ashton Harris and Jennie Livingston. The rear portraits in the film are imprinted onto fake fur and vinyl materials in a quotation of pop productions and a queering of kitsch.

The erasure of difference through this bodily mark speaks to Duchamp’s notion of infra-thin, or ‘indifferent differences’ — his project of recording the ways in which similarities and differences collapse. This concept is understood not by definition, but by example. In ‘Some Scraps of Notes’ Duchamp writes, “The warmth of a seat (which has just/been left) is infra-thin”.

It is necessary to look into the artist’s former enterprise of painting in order to address his shift to photography as the viable medium for what will be proposed as a post-identity production. A large-scale abstract work is comprised of a thin veil of white paint which covers and obscures the white-stretched canvas producing an illusory effect. These earlier canvases provide surfaces on which Udé paints Nigerian symbols, nsibidi, which are signs of the Efik male society, identifiable only to the initiated. This secret system of pictographic signs are inscribed on the bodies, hairdos and textiles of those performing rites. In the series of paintings, Udé plays with the Igbo name ‘Azuka’ which he abstractly translates as “that which does not meet the eye”.4

Udé stopped painting in 1993. At stake was the location of a language that served his desire to operate within a mode of representation capable of working conceptually through the notion of ‘deceptive appearances’. The artist turned to photography, since it is, to quote Bourdieu, “seen as the most perfectly faithful reproduction of the real”.5 Popular perception of the ‘reality-effect’ of the photograph suits the artist’s project. In re-photographing and manipulating the media’s stock of imagery the artist could intervene and begin to deconstruct the set of myths produced throughout the history of commercial and ethnographic photography. As such, it is vital to interrogate the ways in which Udé chooses photography to elucidate the production and circulation of race and gender as spectacle in popular visual culture. Udé’s intervention into the language of commercial photography (magazine covers, movie posters...) alerts audiences to questions concerning the construction, representation, circulation, legibility and marketing of alterity.

In the 1996 exhibition ‘In/sight: African Photographers 1940 to the Present’, at the Guggenheim Museum, Udé assembled an installation entitled Uses of Evidence. Constructing a monumental cube covered in enlarged and montaged photographs of Africa, assembled from various sources found in western media — Time magazine, National Geographic, The New York Times — the artist recreated and revised the theatrical space of minimalist sculpture. Udé’s appropriation of images from the print media — wild animals, starved infants, crowded street scenes, naked bodies — were recontextualised, forming a conglomeration of how Africa is envisioned in the genre of documentary photography filtered through a distinctly western lens. The title of this piece speaks to the almost universal assumption of photography as “neutral and given” evidence.6 In revealing the problematical ways in which images of Africans circulate and are consumed as part of what John Tagg posits as “ethnographic theater”,7 Udé subsumes the documentary function of photography in exposing the manipulations of, and violences in, the proliferation of images of Africa served up by the media. He coopts a cover of Time magazine imaging an ape with the headline ‘Inside the World’s Last Eden: A Personal Journey to a Place No Human Has Ever Seen’ into his installation as archive. In this new incarnation, the image presents evidence of Udé’s own selection and mapping of meaning through montage. His own hand in collecting, selecting and collaging mass media images is analogous to, and literally plays out, the notion of the photograph as mediated and constructed, of myth-making, which is at the centre of his critique.

The interior of the piece houses formal studio portraits of Udé, his friends and family. He suggests that the Guggenheim construction stands as an extension of ‘Azuka’, mediating between “what meets the eye initially and what is behind it”.8 The cube is cut out on all sides, opening up the viewing space to its core. These windows enable viewers to observe each other experi-
encasing the chaotic picturing of a commodified Africa against the domestic interior. This interior/exterior dichotomy has less to do with Udé’s entering a discourse on the fixity of racial stereotypes than his addressing issues inherent to the medium of photography, and the ways in which photographs are circulated and consumed.

The narrative of the Guggenheim photographic galleries in juxtaposition with the show ‘Africa: The Art of a Continent’, was guided by the discursive project of the post-colonial. The MoMAesque dialectic of anachrony and modernity reverberated in this context. In displaying self portraits and images of his family and prominent Nigerian cultural figures, Udé performs a restaging or queering of the Africa of the western imaginary, the colonial fantasy. Queer here reflects the highly contested notion of an unspecified subjectivity engaged in the resignification of dominant practices. It is a term that Udé does not subscribe to, yet it is a useful concept for our purposes in mapping the ambiguity and shifting systems of prioritisation of identities from series to series, from exhibition to exhibition. Creating images of ‘cosmopolitan chic’, Udé deconstructs the neo-primitivist paradigm to which contemporary practitioners from Africa are largely relegated.

An examination of the diversity of Udé’s work, and the scope of venues in which his photography is exhibited, calls into question the popular tendency to label Udé’s work ‘African photography’. Udé’s production complicates this taxonomy, the space in which his work is commonly inserted, by fusing the larger discourses of Contemporary and African Art. The corpus of writing on Udé’s practice focuses heavily on the artist’s status as a contemporary Nigerian ‘photographer’ living and working in New York. The rhetoric of identity politics surrounding the artist’s production does little but rehearse tropes of postcolonial theory (the hybridic, the diasporic...) as ultimately the only way in which to discuss and understand his work. One finds tremendous friction between the set of gendered and racially determined identities with which his work is aligned. The rift becomes apparent along a cultural divide.

In Cover Girl, Udé refashions a familiar site, the space of the magazine cover and its “fascination effects”. In high gloss photographs his face is embedded in the codes of advertising. The images imitate the conventional cover form in the Lacanian sense of mimicry as camouflage, yet the headline text reveals Udé’s version as an impostor, if the portrait of the artist on the cover had not already done so. The success of the series speaks to the significance and the
appeal of the photograph. Udé works with the magazine cover as a theatrical space, a site in which issues of stereotyping and myth-making are played out in no uncertain terms. The artist performs as those subjects which prove to be successful in the circuit of consumption, but also remind us of those who are absent from this business. Pointing to imaged and absent identities and histories, he reveals dislocations in concepts of taste and beauty in western visual culture, acting as a stylist of subjectivities. Evoking the covers of mainstream fashion magazines, Udé recommends “conservative skirts for the working man” and suggests that “real men wear makeup”. The texts of the Cover Girl performances reflect the set of appearances that shift from cover to cover. “Red is always in season”, rehearses a historical emblem of queer culture, yet on the cover of Vogue, the claim collapses into an address to women readers, thus complicating the specificity of media culture’s conventional target audience and obscuring cultural relativity and the readability of bodily signs.

In order to undermine fixed notions of masculinity and Africanity, his series of photographic performances engage with the postmodern tradition of masquerade, conceived in terms of Adanma (Igbo Nigerian male masquerade of the feminine), and yet are commonly received in terms of western drag practices. Udé refers to the “post-gender axis” of Adanma as “[the] male embodiment of femininity [as] performative, critical, ritualised and celebratory”. A spirit is chosen to court beautiful and vain Adanma; “he has only half a body, and so he borrows arms, legs, face, and mouth from the most beautiful spirits, and thus becomes a stunningly handsome, but composite being”. Art historian Benjamin Hufbauer records and reads Adanma as “…a presentation of men of femininity — glamorized, idealized, parodied, and controlled... Her body is coded as both sensual and contemporary, for she wears a westernized skirt, ruffled blouse, and her face is made up with cosmetics... The playlet emphasizes that femininity is a performance... actively confus[ing] the division between masculine and feminine”.11 This tradition signals local desires to produce a critical account of the fluid and migratory affectations of destabilised gender identities in Igbo society, a culture in which masquerade is solely a masculine activity. In Udé’s production, the suturing and cross-coding of feminine and masculine signs, western and non-western conceptions of masquerade problem-atise cultural intelligibility of the photographed body.

Udé reveals, “Looking beyond colonial impediments, I see the circumstances of my artistic practice and identity as inextricably informed by the multiplicity
of conflicting cultural influences I have inherited and delineated to serve myself. It is little wonder that I am nobody’s artist but my own”. The literature on Udé’s work has not gone further than to suggest that histories and identities of difference are filtered through codes of Adanna mapped onto sites of popular visual culture. The contradictions and questions the Cover Girl series raises stem from the tension in wanting to fuse these traditions. The photographs do not merely reflect a recontextualisation of the socio-political strategies of Igbo masquerade, but accomplish a disruption of assuming a singular origin for the operation of gender performativity. Candice Breitz carelessly labels the incoherence of identifying Cover Girl as a production of what Marjorie Garber terms “transvestite effect[s]”; Kobena Mercer reads “Udé’s unreadable ambivalence” as associated with androgyny; whereas Okwui Enwezor and Octavia Zaya place Udé’s performative gestures within a homogeneous space of African cultural practices as transposed onto the site of western print media. In drawing from different cultural casts the artist is able to perform out of fixed notions of gender configuration and performativeness itself, as his images represent a syncretic conceptualisation of western and non-western notions of masquerade. Udé becomes the compositing male being of the Adanna production, and likens this operation to the prescriptions of difference performed in the media, what Mercer terms a “media-literate masquerade”. The primary aspect of African masquerade, the concealed identity of the performer, serves the artist’s purpose in his efforts to put forth a body that defies translatability. Butler’s question, “what is masked in masquerade?” interrogates masking as an identificatory procedure of ‘appearing as being’, which becomes an appearing of ‘could be’ in Udé’s work. Akin to the logic of Butler, Udé visualises the production of surfaces in which subjects and acts appear in a process of resignifying possible registers of identities.

Is it possible to decode Udé’s layered effect of disparate cultural castings of gender? In Udé’s Town and Country, Cover Girl Uli, Igbo, Nigerian body painting mimicking scarification is combined with lipstick. Posh suiting is met with Calvin Klein briefs as hair accessory or wig wrap. Signs of normative bodily inscription are literally turned on their head. In Bazaar, the tailored male is given a makeover, “the dandy redefined”. Makeup veils an untranslatable body that performs to an occidental audience as drag-like, in a kind of queer masquerade. Diana Fuss in ‘Interior Colonies: Frantz Fanon and the Politics of Identification’ distinguishes mimicry from masquerade as a role playfully performed versus one that is unconsciously assumed. Yet African masquerade sits within her definition of mimetic performances. It is the distinction between imitation and identification which gets conflated in readings of Udé’s performative photographs. As Fanon’s Algerian “unveiled-woman-outside” invents herself in a western guise, “cultural[ly] cross dressing”, so too does Udé. This reinvention is not a mode of passing by imitative strategies, but by disrupting means of readability. Fuss’ problematisation of the mask in Fanon’s Black Skin White Masks as a device of colonial mimesis serves our purposes in understanding Udé’s performativity. “Is it possible for the mimicking subject to inhabit fully a performative role while still remaining largely outside it?” Fuss continues, “not all forms of imitation are identifications.”

In Sisterhood (1994), Iké Udé and Lyle Ashton Harris are both photographed in heavy makeup and smart suits. This collaboration speaks to their engagements with similar theatrical procedures which then fashion disparate performative acts in their own work. Udé’s Town and Country, Cover Girl caption reads “L.A. Harris reports from Lagos”. Udé summons Harris and his
self--staging as drag queen gone wrong, a parodic mutation of queen culture, from his Construct series (1987–88), in which he recasts the genre of African American male nudes in the tradition of Mapplethorpe, and embodies the act of passing via the Fanonian conception of the mask. Harris’s work evokes dialectics of black/white, natural/artificial, male/female, yet in Udé’s project, blush and blazer are recoded away from feminine/masculine taxonomies. The style of Cover Girl is not the ‘Paris is Burning’ brand of drag, but read as a corporate queer, an everyday pret-a-porter, a metropolising of the masculinised maquillage of Wodaabe herders of the Niger, who apply cosmetics created from the skin of chameleons in a process of visage transformation. To borrow from Butler, “subversive bodily acts” are played out by Udé as veiled surface acts. Moreover, the sculptural apparatus of African modes of masking identity is substituted by the mechanism of makeup as signalled in the title of the photographic series — Cover Girl. Cosmetic application serves as veil, “the boundary of indistinguishable shades of difference”.

Lyle Ashton Harris’s conceptual montaged series Drag Racing shows Udé looking into a mirror which reads “Each man sees beauty in another but cannot say it they kill that which they love Iké in Lyle’s Studio”. This image creates an interesting dialogue with a film still from Isaac Julien’s Frantz Fanon Black Skin White Masks (1995), in which a woman’s face is projected onto a veil in an elliptical fashion. At this point in the film, a Fanon passage on veiling is read as a woman sits at a dressing table and unmaskses her face. The veil, like Sedgwick’s “epistemology of the closet”, discloses the disguises of corporeal identities, veiling race and closeting sexual identity. These operations of what are deemed in the West as the queer and the colonial seem to coalesce in Udé’s images. Fanon’s material veil as a sign of cultural determination is metamorphosed by Udé, ephemeralised, revisualised as a crafty signifier of cultural and gendered identities whose transparency is only a guise of legibility. Veiling resists accessibility. It is a method of escaping essen-tialisms and of eclipsing intelligibility. The operation of the veil like the closet, a strategy to see without being seen, is transposed by Udé into a means of abstracting cultural signs to locate new dimensions for the body. Disengaging gendered codes from their distinctive signifiers, a recoding of surface acts is played out in a game of cultural re-dress.

The metaphors of the veil and the mask converge in the dissolving of regulatory codings of racialised and gendered bodies. Under what conditions are the artist’s bodily inscriptions identifiable? How can masquerade with its rootedness in

18 Iké Udé, ‘Cover Girl’, Thresholds of Viewing Culture, University of California, Santa Barbara, vol 9, p 73.

Lyle Ashton Harris and Iké Udé, Sisterhood, 1994, Polaroid photograph
western theories of the psycho-sexual operations of femininity, as well as itseligion to African social and political performance, be negotiated by Udé and
his audiences? It seems that the disruption lies in that one is not required to
distinguish between performances that are drag-like or masquerade-like, and
that Udé scales down these operations to similar surface acts.

What surfaces in Udé’s photographs is the epitome of the ‘regarded self’,
embodied by portraits of the artist and part of the Celluloid Frames series (1995).
Udé’s brand of photography serves to ‘denaturalise’ the spectacularised and
specified racially and sexually inscribed subject, principally that figure
circulating as a sign of ‘Africanity’. No longer located as part of a collective, or
collapsed within the Africa framed by the western imagination, identification
begins with ‘the regarded self’. Another manifestation of ‘the regarded self’ is
pictured as the centrefold of Glamour. Udé is confronted by his own gaze as his
image is duplicated on the magazine cover, literalising the mirror stage as self-
staged, a means of visualising identification via self-definition. Udé becomes
his own Rrose Séaly touched by Adanna. His face in a variety of guises — the
cover girl, the waif, the dandy: images found in conventional media-society —
is now served up to the public to test the waters to see if there is room to locate
a new photographed body. The ‘regarded self’ announces the ‘death of the
noble savage’, in this way interrogating the primitising myth’s perennial
existence in high art and popular culture.

Most recently, Udé’s Time magazine cover-portrait was mass produced and
posted on lamp posts and bus shelters in downtown Johannesburg and its
suburbs as part of the Second Johannesburg Biennale, 1997. The headline
daughterly rehearses the title of Kaja Silverman’s book, Male Subjectivity at the
Margins, a psycho-cultural reading of contemporary visual strategies and the
construction of gender and race. Critical discourse turns into popular news. In
this image, Udé, adorned in platinum wig, heavily applied make-up and
tailored suit, is self-titled and identified as ‘Man of the Year Prince I.K.’ Udé’s
poster functioned as a subversive image entering the public landscape, and as
signage meshing with the urban terrain of posted news headlines planted on
street corners of the city. The poster playfully varied its public circulation,
acting as both familiar and inaccessible within the popular domain. The
disparity of image, text and space, or subject, language and location, rehearses
Kwame Anthony Appiah’s concept of the “cultural variability that cosmopoli-
tanism celebrates”\textsuperscript{20} Moreover, the rendering and reading of identity is
negotiated through a transfusion of the rhetoric of sameness and difference
varied and complicated by subject, spectator and site. Mercer’s characterisation
of the artist’s practice marked by “diasporic experiences of travel,
displacement, and border crossing...”\textsuperscript{21} parallels the discursive project of Udé’s
position within the South African exhibition. Udé stood out in the Biennale as
an artist whose work epitomises the ‘post-nationalist agenda’ of the show, an
exhibit of international art centred around notions of globalisation, migration,
diaspora — a scene of indeterminacy and reversals — and hybridity, and its
translation as an impossible act.