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Is it possible for an artist living in the 21st century to separate their practice from their identity?

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This essay will discuss the ways in which identity, expression, and reaction influence creative practice. The aim is to understand why certain artworks are made, be it their content or materiality. Firstly, is the work of Tomie Arai, who uses silkscreen printing to illustrate her experience as a woman within domesticity. Secondly is Wangechi Mutu and her captivating personification of environmental frustration within the 21st century. Lastly is Philip-Lorca diCorcia who documents the history of the AIDS epidemic through his artwork. Although these three artworks are very different, they all have something common. This commonality is a factor that I will explore within this essay.

The way we choose to identify ourselves shapes the way we experience life. Identity is a state of mind where someone recognizes their character traits based on their environment, which then influences their interests and the people they surround themselves with (Bianpoen, 2017). There are many factors that can influence someone's identity, such as; gender, age, religion, race, class, ethnicity, and sexual orientation (Luoma, 2005). Artists too are influenced by these factors.

"Could we ever know each other in the slightest without the arts?"

(Gabrielle Roy, 1962)

One of the key inspirations for creative practice is cultural identity. Our home environment and familial relationships shape the way we operate creatively. Every piece carries a personal history along with it, whether it is intentional or not. Our customs, behaviours, and values are by-products of our cultural conditioning. Before we are taught how to read or write, art is the primary means of symbol making and

expression of our world and environment (Barsh, 2005). This will vary from culture to culture, and therefore we will carry this creative identity with us our entire lives. An artist who discusses her identity based on her upbringing is Tomie Arai.

Born in 1949, Arai is a third-generation Asian American public artist and printmaker of Japanese descent. Her work possesses a deep understanding of her heritage, as she uses techniques traditionally associated with Japanese culture, such as silk screen printing (Anatol, 2018). This is present in her 1988 piece titled, *Laundryman's Daughter*.



Figure 1: Tomie Arai, *Laundryman's Daughter*, (1989)

Arai's powerful use of symbols and composition form an image which builds an intriguing visual narrative. Her identity as an Asian American woman influences and builds upon themes such as race, gender, and urban experience. Firstly, the choice of only using different shades of black, blue, and red ink creates a very powerful and stark image. Print layering can be seen within the image as the figures are shadowed by strong red tones, which also is dashed onto the clothes of the woman in white. There are numerous symbols dotted around, such as fans and Japanese calligraphy, which directly reflect her cultural identity. Additionally, there are two rectangular shapes behind her, possibly a window on the left and a wall on the right. These symbols could be interpreted as signifiers of her environment, again linking back to the importance of identity within creative practice. The composition of the figures is telling of the relationship between the individuals, as the older woman is sitting and the younger girl is standing behind her, connoting a sense of power and respect. As the title suggests, it is possible that these two women are mother and daughter. The figures look as if they are in mourning, further implied by the image held by the mother. It looks like a portrait of a man, perhaps *The Laundryman* himself. This reflects the role of women within traditional Japanese culture, and many cultures around the world, as either the daughter or the wife (Kinkaid, 2019). Overall, the image has a mournful and serious presence to it, despite the vibrancy of the colours. It is very telling of Arai's experience as a woman and her position within American and Japanese societies. Another artist with a strong cultural and visual identity is Lynette Yiadom Boakye.



Figure 2: Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, *Complication*, (2013)

The figures within Yiadom-Boakye's paintings hold a certain mystery. Her subjects are often alone, captured closely and illustrated monochromatically. In an article for The New York Times, Faye Hirsch stated; *"Nearly every one of Yiadom-Boakye's characters is black. They are also entirely fictional, inventions of a British artist whose canny deployment of the genre of portraiture summons both its triumphs and its omissions."* (Hirsch, 2015)

As mentioned in the above quote, race and identity are central topics of Yiadom-Boakye work, as they directly reflect her own experience growing up in England as a woman of colour. Her work is incredibly intimate and personal; these paintings feel as if they are painted in the moment, in front of real people, but they are entirely fictional. The figures are illustrated in a way which makes you feel like you already know them, or perhaps saw them in a dream. Her work has a strong sense of personal identity but also touches on a broader black and British experience.

In conclusion, identity is more than the way you see yourself, it is also the way the rest of the world sees you. It's possible that identity is not controllable by oneself but determined and organised by factors beyond one's scope (Gronlund, 2014). This can

be seen in both Arai and Yiadom-Boakye's work, as both use their creativity to discuss race, gender, and class within the realm of their identities.

Expressive arts bridge the gap between the conscious and unconscious mind (Sheikh, 2018). The way we express ourselves is an extremely unique thing. Creative minds use art to vent or communicate thoughts and feelings. But how do you turn these things into forms which other people will relate to? How do you turn a concept into an entity? This is where contextual understanding becomes important, as it teaches you the impact of materials and the feelings they convey. Each material will have its own weight and meaning to it, both emotional and physical. A figure built from stone, for example, will have a tactility unique to that material. Visual narratives and symbols also work in a similar fashion. What you choose to illustrate and the way it is expressed influences the viewer's experience of the artwork. This is clear within the work of Wangechi Mutu

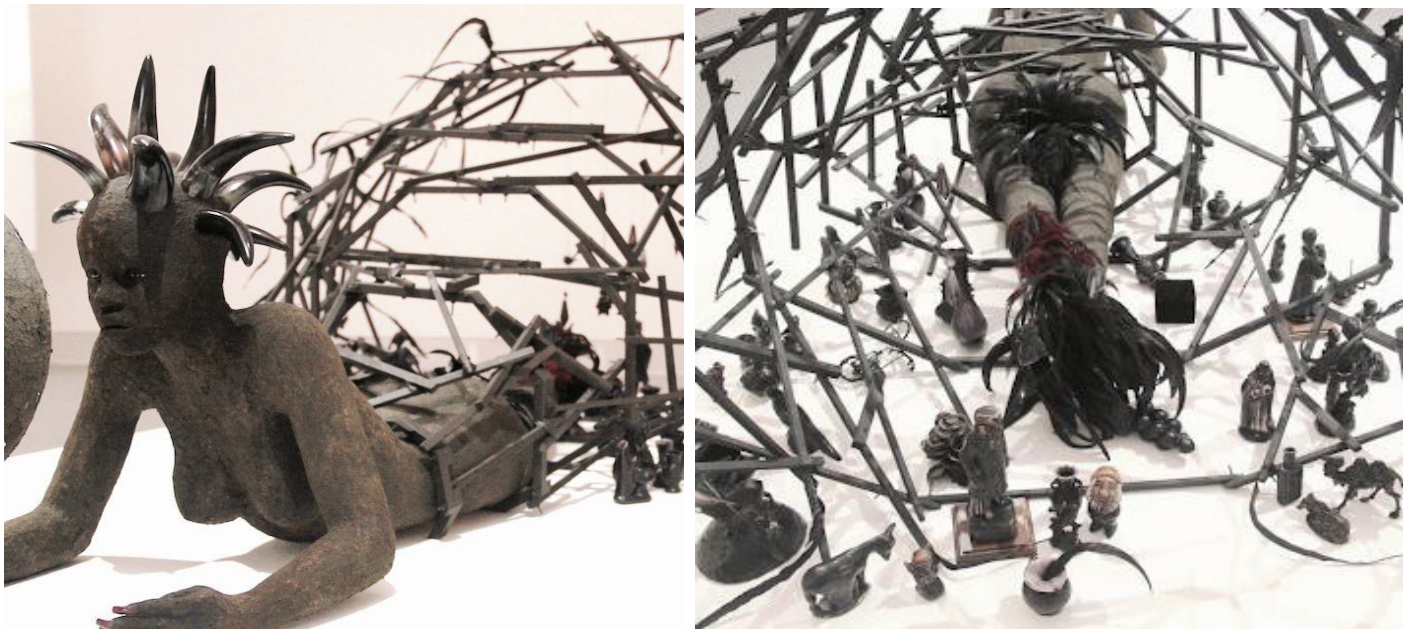


Figure 3: Wangechi Mutu, *She's got the whole world in her*, (2015)

She's got the whole world in her is part of a 2015 exhibition for the Venice Biennale Arte titled *THE END OF CARRYING IT ALL*. The intent of this exhibition is to illustrate the end of materialism through post-apocalyptic imagery.

In 2015, Iam Taem wrote an article for Intense Art Magazine, which stated "*The black female body in She's Got the Whole World in Her is whole and distinguishable. She is used as a revolutionary tool to address historical and cultural narrative of post imperialism and feminism with symbolic objects placed around her in the cage.*"

It has been said that women's bodies are often treated as sites of containment, control, and oppression (Grosz, 1994). Mutu illustrates that concept through intriguing visual expression and symbolism. The female body lies on the ground in a cobra-like pose, its bottom half snared within a dress shaped cage. Its legs are covered with feathers and surrounded by strange figures, plants, and animals. The artificial nails and the feathers contrast greatly, as they symbolise old versus new ways of female ornamentation. Perhaps, this figure represents the earth and its people. *She's got the whole world in her* could be a visual representation of mother earth. The sculpture itself is quite difficult to look at as the metal cage digs deep into her waist. But despite the whirlwind happening behind her, she looks forward towards the globe. This could reflect a wider female experience of acting matriarch of the family from a young age (Kiesel, 2018). Interestingly, the material the sculpture looks metallic, but is made from paper and wax. This is relevant when discussing expression, as Mutu took otherwise common and 'light' materials and made them feel heavy and dense. It is debatable that someone from a different background to Mutu would have made something dissimilar with the same materials, as it was her personal identity that influenced her artistic expression. Additionally, in relation to race and gender, the imprisonment of the figure within the metallic bars connotes

feelings of frustration, possibly due to the way Mutu is treated by society as an African woman. It is possible that *She's got the whole world in her* expresses the pain and fatigue felt by mother earth due to humanity's obsession with possession. Climate Change is becoming more of a threat every year, (Gerretsen, 2021), and so this piece may be Mutu's way of expressing her disdain for the way humans live in the 20th century. Perhaps it is Mutu herself emerging from the cage, the dress acting as a portal to another planet.

Upon reflection, expression is the way your identity and experience influence your creative practice, which also requires an intellectual understanding of the power that materials and symbols possess. *She's got the whole world in her* was produced in response to Mutu's experience as a black woman in the 21st century. Each feather, metal bar and acrylic nail hold a particular relevance within Mutu's way of self-expression.

From the first and second world war to the 2020 pandemic, this past century has seen cultural and political change like never before (Laing, 2020). But how do artists react when put in positions of grief, loss, or anger? Interestingly, many artists around the globe take their frustration by turning their reaction into inspiration. This is clear when reflecting upon the American artists of the 1980s and 1990s. People like Jean-Michel Basquiat, Nan Goldin and Keith Haring used their creative platforms to discuss otherwise 'taboo' topics. (Tate, 2019)

An event which challenged a large part of the American art scene of the 1980s was the HIV and AIDS epidemic. Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) was first recognized as a new disease in 1981 when increasing numbers of young

homosexual men succumbed to unusual opportunistic infections and rare

malignancies (Greene, 2007). Over the years, treatment and awareness about the disease has improved, but during the 1980s and 1990s, HIV and AIDS was essentially a death sentence (Naniche, 2018). Many people lost their loved ones during this time. Artist Keith Haring was one of many artists who used his art as a platform to raise awareness.



Figure 4: Keith Haring, *Ignorance = Fear* (1989)

Haring himself was diagnosed with AIDS in 1988 and used his platform as an artist to raise awareness of the disease. His poster titled *Ignorance = Fear* references the classic three wise monkeys, 'see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil.' This implies that those who remain silent on the deaths of many were somewhat responsible. The pink triangle is a symbol to identify LGBTQ+ people, further emphasising the meaning behind the image. Haring wanted to reach as many people as possible through his art to spread awareness about these issues. Another artist who touches on similar topics is as Philip-Lorca diCorcia.



Figure 5: Philip-Lorca diCorcia, *Vittorio Scarpatti* (1989)

diCorcia has a talent for capturing ordinary American life and making it seem extraordinary. Through intriguing composition and colour manipulation, otherwise common landscapes become somewhat dreamlike, and *Vittorio Scarpatti* is no exception. The figure stares hollowly directly towards the viewer. It is obvious that they are quite unwell, due to the bandages patched over their torso. diCorcia manipulated the image to make it seem as if the figure is fading away, implying that this person is slowly dying, becoming a ghost. Behind him are possible gifts from loved ones, a teddy bear, balloons, flowers, reflecting how much he was loved and shall be missed. There is a beaming light emanating from behind the figure, possibly representing the afterlife. It almost seems as if the light is slowly consuming him, headfirst. The 'figure' is Italian artist *Vittorio Scarpatti* (the title of the piece). Unfortunately, he passed away from AIDS in 1989 at the age of 34, the same year this photograph was taken. In his last few months of life, Scarpatti made several intense and emotional drawings in reaction to his declining health.



Figure 6: Vittorio Scarpatti, *Untitled* (1989)

The words 'I WANNA GET THE HELL OUT CLUB' are written on the top of the drawing and on the shirt of the second figure. The word 'club' could be in reference to the number of people who were suffering from the same affliction as him, and how they all had enough of the pain. Similarly, the word 'hell' mirrors the language used against people with AIDS, some saying that because of their identities, they deserve suffering. Some of his writing is in Italian and some in English, reflecting the way he expressed his thoughts in those final days and how he became increasingly bewildered. Both the artist and the subject expressed their frustration and pain in both personal and extraordinary ways. This reaction to death and disease is one of many, as artists around the globe take it upon themselves to use their platform to

discuss otherwise 'taboo' topics. The ability to understand and reflect upon world events is a crucial skill and speaks to the importance of the arts, particularly within the 21st century.

Upon reflection, all three of these key words are somewhat similar, but have distinct differences which set them apart. This is because they all interact with each other in different ways. An artist who discusses identity and reaction would not have the same impact if they did not understand expression, and vice versa. During my research, one word would often blend into the discussion of another, which emphasises the importance of these keywords within any creative practice. Identity is based upon your upbringing and your environment. Expression is dependent on your contextual understanding and experience of different materials. Reaction revolves around your personal viewpoint and feelings toward a particular event. You cannot operate with just one, as identity is the mind, expression is the hand, and reaction is the heart of an artist. These three words combine to form ideas and concepts that heavily influence my practice. They are constantly in my mind when I'm making art. From this body of research, I have formed a research question that I will analyse further in my final thesis. The question is as follows: *Is it possible for an artist living in the 21st century to separate their practice from their identity?*

Within this question I also have several possible sub questions, such as: can art pave a way for social change? Can art be separated from activism? Is art a form of documentation/timeline of events throughout history? I look forward to further researching and analysing these ideas within my independent inquiry.

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Well done, XXXXXX, this is an excellent, well-structured, and well-researched proposal. It establishes a very good base for continued research into your level 6 Independent Project module.

Download and save your feedback from ADAD5003 and ADAD5004 now, as you will not be able to access it next academic year and it is a valuable reminder on areas to improve and develop.

Your feedback details for each assessment component, is as below:

Engagement with Literature Skills (weighted at 20% of the total mark)

- Show your engagement with relevant and credible literature.
- Use discussion, critique and referencing to demonstrate your awareness of suitable theories and concepts.
- Apply your referencing skills clearly and consistently.

A solid range of relevant research supports your discussion points and fits very well with the interesting selection of artists you have chosen to help illustrate your ideas.

Referencing is well applied throughout.

Knowledge and Understanding Skills (weighted at 30% of the total mark)

- Manage and organise your research information into the given framework.
- Show your knowledge and understanding of the principles and theories of your topic.
- Use analysis, discussion, and bibliographic referencing to show your knowledge of relevant research and scholarship.

An excellent demonstration of subject knowledge is evident throughout. Your understanding of the subject has allowed you to contextualise the various selected artists.

Your own discussion points are supported with judicious use of both direct quotation but also referenced ideas that you have incorporated well into your own text.

Cognitive and Intellectual Skills (weighted at 30% of the total mark)

- create links and relationships to theories and practices that apply to your chosen keywords;
- critically evaluate and analyse the relevant theoretical and practice-based discourses;
- conclude by outlining and justifying the research question (or questions) that have come from your exploration.

Critical evaluation and analysis are evident throughout this proposal and sustained to the upper end of an appropriate level. You have carefully chosen artists, works and ideas that support the overarching thesis while also providing a narrative to your developing themes.

There is an excellent understanding of underlying themes. Your consideration and reflection on the process builds toward a conclusion that speculates on how this writing will evolve toward the next stage.

Practical Application Skills (weighted at 10% of the total mark)

- Assimilate and apply the required rules and criteria of the given format to your text;
- Organise information into a coherent framework which identifies a range of concepts and theories and discusses their merits and limitations;
- Consistently apply referencing conventions to suit the required format.

This is a very well-structured essay that successfully introduces, explores, and analyses the subject.

You have adhered to the expected academic protocols yet also delivered a proposal that reflects your individuality as a writer. Referencing is well applied and accurately presented in the bibliography and illustration list.

Quotes have been used quite sparingly, especially toward the end of the proposal, but this does not unbalance it as referencing through paraphrasing and discussion is made throughout.

Transferable Skills for Life and Professional Practice (weighted at 10% of the total mark)

- *Present your text professionally, applying attention to the conventions of English language and grammar.*
- *Communicate your ideas in a coherent and consistent style with due consideration to the reader/audience.*
- *Apply your writing knowledge showing a command of writing structures, such as sentence structure, paragraphing, and appropriate and explicit use of visuals to enhance communication.*

An excellent standard of written English that allows the reader an uninterrupted journey through your thought processes.

This results in a consistently high Level of communication.

Well done!