

INTERZONES

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The narcissism that flavors Udé's performance of identity is far more than dismissive parody. The narcissist is engaged in a longing for wholeness, for the sense of his sameness unto himself, a sense of plenitude. It is the encounter of difference (the uncanny experience of one's reflection in the mirror as 'other'), an encounter which induces the fear of falling apart, that induces the narcissist to reassure himself through a frenzied proliferation of the same, of himself. (Udé: "I use the mirror wisely, as a site of beauty and meditation. When I look into the mirror, I other myself"). And yet, this proliferation is always accompanied by the recognition of a threat to self-integrity (since the mirror splits the self); for the very repetition of the signifier exposes it as detachable.

Udé's covers are littered with detachable parts. These are not limited to the prostheses with which he adorns himself (the wigs, the make-up, the various vestimentary guises), but also discernible in the headlines which are placed alongside these repetitions of self. A headline on the cover of Udé's *GQ* asks 'What Is The Average Man's Penis Size? Find Out', while another reads 'Real Men Wear Makeup: How-To-Do Tips inside'. And, it is not only in the figure of the cross-dressed Udé on the cover of *Cosmopolitan* that we sense a narcissistic ambivalence, but as much so, in the headlines on the same cover, which read 'Cleopatra, Queen of Sheba & the handicap of Venus De Milo' or 'Hottentot Venus' and 'La Belle Hottentote'. In addition to Udé 'himself' then, this cover is inhabited by the nose of Cleopatra, the phallic Queen of Sheba, the lack of the Venus De Milo and the 'deformed' labia of the Venus Hottentot.

But, if detachable parts organize our performance of identity, if we must claim our wholeness through the reconstitution of the other as self, by means of a fetish which is itself always already displaced from its origin, then we must confront the impossibility of ever returning to a state of originary wholeness. The fetish both recognizes and disavows this threat to wholeness and, in preserving both castration and its denial, splits the subject. The 'transvestite effect' is the theatricalization of the anxiety of lack accompanying this split, through the frenzied reiteration of that upon which 'realness' hedges its bets, the incontrovertibly detachable phallus. The 'transvestite effect' is always ambivalent –it neither solely has the phallus or is phallic, but seems to be the phallus. The constant reference to the presence/absence of the phallus (all those detachable parts) in Udé's work, is both a strategy of reassurance (provoked by the nostalgia for wholeness) and a joke at the expense of that nostalgia, since the compensation offered by the detachable part is always artifactual and temporary (it is never the 'real' thing that serves to reinstate the fantasy of wholeness).

The 'transvestite effect' produced by the narcissism which permeates Udé's work is the locus of this work's political discursivity, rather than a trite side-effect of its 'deeper' political intervention. Udé's narcissism is neither simply the self-transparent parody of a narcissism which he rejects, nor simply an exercise in 'self-indulgence' and 'self-congratulation'. It is both the recognition of how we are all constantly in danger of falling apart, and, the enactment of a fantasy that we might transcend all of this falling apart and once again be whole. As noted before, some have chosen to associate Udé's performance of identity exclusively with drag, while others have linked it insistently to Adanma. But what if 'western drag traditions' were not entirely 'western', or if we found that the 'contemporary Igbo parade' was not purely 'Igbo'? In the domain of the 'transvestite effect', all claims to authentic origin and precedence are rendered futile. Like the spirit-husband, Udé is constantly putting himself together on one magazine cover, only to invariably fall apart and be reconstituted on the next. Like all subjects, he is a locus for the play of signifiers of identity, rather than the point of their coherent and enduring convergence in consciousness. Writers like Butler and Bhabha suggest that it is in the interstices that invariably open up between such signifiers that moments of transformative agency might be sought. Such moments are opened up by the stutterings, the unavoidable incongruities, which interrupt the performance of coherent identity.

Moments of liberatory potential are nascent in the performance of identity at the very points where contradictory signifiers collide, casting aspersions on the integrity of the individual, the entity which they claim simultaneously as the locus of their confluence.

CANDICE BREITZ



GOQ

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