

Time passing upside down: Julie Rrap's *360 degree self-portrait*

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IF ART IS TO HAVE ANY RESONANCE IN TODAY'S WORLD, pressured as it is with increasingly frantic and superficial types of human expression and interaction, then it must find ways to slow meaning down. Art at its most interesting impedes the otherwise rapid flow of information between subjects and objects by blocking the interface which we expect to deliver instant gratification or by suspending our comprehension of what we are seeing, forcing us to find innovative ways to engage with what we don't understand.

Throughout her thirty-year career, Julie Rrap has consistently found ways of welcoming, and even eliciting, the recalcitrant moments when circuits of expression give way to incomprehension, opening out this delay in meaning that affords time for us to think. Rrap creates images, objects and installations that are often productively baffling and mysterious in the way in which they evoke bodily responses but also suspend intellectual attempts to pin down meaning. Rrap has done this by employing her own body, always filtering and manipulating its appearance through technologies from photography to video to body casting. In this way she explores the interrelations between the body and its modes of experience, presentation and representation, pointing to the overlapping and co-constitutive nature of being, seeing and feeling. Art, in Rrap's practice, traces and retraces this interesting nexus – making us think.

Rrap's 2009 project *360 degree self-portrait* exemplifies this way of engaging the viewer yet never allowing easy access to the work. We glance and we think we see a simple image of Rrap's face staring forth with little emotional inflection. But Rrap does not disappoint our expectations that something seemingly simple will reveal itself through time to be increasingly unsettling. If we stop to stare, a creepy sense of something going awry descends on us. Her face looks strained – no, wait, not strained, but weighted, as if suffering from the effects of air pressure. But no, that's not quite right either. As we continue to

look we feel empathetically exhausted, because her face seems pressured or manipulated, the skin moving gradually, but by an energy we cannot pinpoint. Her eyes are tearing; she is all but grimacing. We begin to realise that her face seems to sag *upwards*, the looseness of her still beautiful middle-aged flesh dragged or pulled. As time passes, her face becomes increasingly strange before our eyes; it shifts shape almost imperceptibly, but then (even as we continue to watch without looking away) we realise it has been transformed as if behind our backs.

Could this be some traction within the body itself, eating it from within, dragging it hither and thither? Or is it a power that is disturbing the flesh from the outside? We become acutely aware of the body as a malleable thing in space, and one profoundly affected by spatial pressures and by the passage of time. But here the uncanny effects of Rrap's shape-shifting face seem *out of time*, suspended. Our understanding is thwarted. We both identify in obvious ways with the self-portrait format – the face as a kind of 'double' of our face – and feel stymied by its impossible transformations.

In fact, *360 degree self-portrait*, if one cares to ask, was made by suspending Rrap's body from a mechanical frame and filming her upside-down face as it adjusts to the pull of gravity, her body tugged by the vicissitudes of space and time. The face on the screen is oriented as we expect a face to be at first (doubling or mimicking our own orientation), but its appearance is reversed from our expectations.

360 degree self-portrait reminds us that the body in Rrap's practice is uncanny in the surrealist or Freudian sense. In relation to Rrap's bodies, we find ourselves suspended momentarily in a state of incomprehension that opens up a gap and causes a delay of productive cognitive confusion. It is this gap which I have suggested is crucial to any opening of emotional and political resonance in contemporary art today.

