



Julie Rrap

Body Double

Victoria Lynn

During the 1960s and 1970s the historical achievements of women artists and writers underwent re-appraisal and the female gender was subject to renewed analysis and re-positioning. Feminism was a social movement seeking equal pay, representation and rights for women, an emerging field of academic inquiry that has since evolved into ‘gender studies’, and a specific period in twentieth-century art history. It allowed women to explore ‘the pleasures of resistance, of deconstruction, of discovery, of defining, of fragmenting, of redefining’.¹ The feminine stereotypes of mother, sister, wife, daughter, model, whore and muse were unravelled, while radical new images by, about and for women were created. Female bodies were no longer considered to be mere biological entities, they were understood to be inscribed with a history of objectification. New histories were written about and on these bodies.

As a student Rrap was aware of Simone de Beauvoir’s classic 1949 book, *The Second Sex*, and witnessed the emergence of feminism. Her relationship with this period, and the various feminisms that have emerged since, can be delineated in two principle ways. First, Rrap’s oeuvre has performance at its centre. Even though the artist does not perform live for an audience, she does perform for her camera and with her sculptural materials. More often than not, her works implicate the viewer, at times asking for direct interaction. The artist

does not proceed from a desire to express the self. Rather she uses her performing body as a tool. Second, Rrap has embraced photography and video in the feminist spirit of exploring the materials of the very media that has been used to objectify women. She uses photography to deconstruct the subject and subvert the hand-made traditions of painting and sculpture.

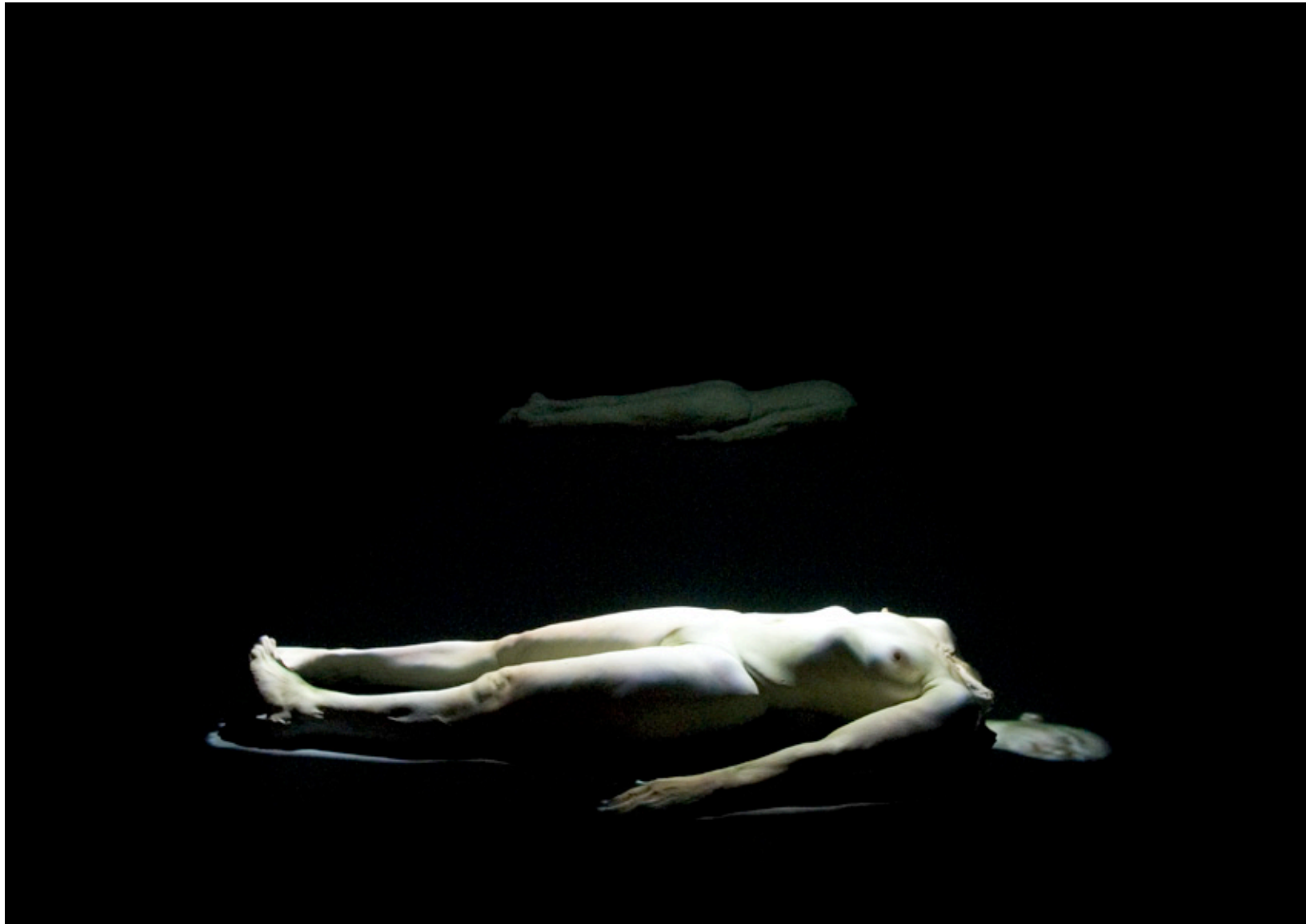
These two principle approaches in Rrap’s work – performance and photography – underpin the emergence and consolidation of an important motif, the ‘body double’. As a title, ‘body double’ was not used by Rrap until 2007, but as a guiding metaphor it has been present in her work since the beginning. Conventionally referring to the person who stands in for the actor in a film, a body double impersonates an actor during episodes that involve specialist skills, such as stunts. In Rrap’s work, the body double figures in two central ways: either her self-image is repeated or doubled as a subversive method, or the viewer becomes the body double, by being invited to think of themselves as the stand-in or prosthetic for Rrap’s own absent body in the sculptures.

Rrap’s work always foregrounds the artifice of photography, to present a complex and vital relationship between the image and what it represents. Keenly aware of the dominance of the photographic image in the construction of a broad societal conception of femininity, Rrap persists in undermining its

Previous page
Eiko from the series
A-R-Mour 2000
type C photograph
129 x 129 x 8 cm, edition 3/15
Museum of Contemporary
Art, gift of Andrew and
Cathy Cameron, 2008

Right
Overstepping 2001
digital print
124.5 x 124.5 x 8 cm, edition 10/15
Museum of Contemporary
Art, gift of Andrew and
Cathy Cameron, 2008





Above

Body Double 2007
single-channel digital video
projection, sound, silicone, rubber
Collection of the artist



Above

Flyer from the series
Soft Targets 2004
pure pigment print on
acid-free rag paper
152.5 x 187 x 8 cm, edition 5/9
Museum of Contemporary
Art, gift of Andrew and
Cathy Cameron, 2008

power. She does this, first, by representing her own body – often in the nude (taking control of her own representation while also contravening some feminist principles) – and second, by disclosing the creative processes of her images, installations and sculptures. Because the artist reveals both the body and the process, she frees herself and the viewer from being mere puppets of the technical apparatus, a dynamic decried by Vilém Flusser.² Indeed, rather than hiding this apparatus, Rrap divulges it as a code of photography, often referring to the camera as a prosthetic eye. Her emphasis on process itself – the multiple representations of the self – creates repetition, making the viewer more aware of the gulf between the real and its representation. Rrap's work becomes a play of body doubles.

These ideas were first explored in a seminal installation by Rrap entitled *Disclosures: A Photographic Construct* (1982). There are photographs within photographs. There are images mirrored and repeated throughout the installation. *Disclosures* also plays upon our different interpretations of black-and-white images and colour: black-and-white suggesting documentary, and colour suggesting artifice. Rrap represents herself as a photographer, the author of the image, but she is also the model, dressed and undressed, posing and not posing, 'performing' for her own camera. The female gender is fractured and made temporal by this work, for even though the

installation consists of still images, we, as participants, navigate the space and gradually become its subject. Rrap comments, 'The camera becomes an interesting tool: it becomes the witness. Throughout history, weapons have been taken up to exorcise fears, and I have used the camera like that ... *Disclosures* is a transgressive space in which the viewer is directly implicated. They become the site of the two views.'³

As we journey up and down the two corridors of images in *Disclosures*, the individual units begin to form sequences, as if they were stills from a moving image. The female gender unfolds through time, and through a series of performative acts. Everything about being a woman (and, in this case, about making an image of a woman) comes to be an 'act' or a 'role' that is played out. The codes of photography are literally 'disclosed' through this shuttling of images. The artist has the 'last laugh' because the traditional role of voyeur is transposed from the viewer into the subject. All of a sudden, we, the audience, are being looked at.

Rrap's work resonates with many aspects of the history of performance art, but her approach to performance is tangential. Unlike most performance artists she creates private actions. These emerge out of a photographic practice, and are part of the process of making the work rather than considered as

Right

Disclosures: A Photographic Construct 1982
16 type C photographs, 60 black-and-white prints, fishing line
dimensions variable
Museum of Contemporary Art, purchased 1994
Julie Rrap: Body Double,
installation view, MCA 2007-08





Left

Julie Rrap: *Body Double*,
installation view, MCA 2007-08

artworks in themselves. Rrap performs with her body as a tool rather than through it as a form of personal and subjective expression. She synthesises the roles of performer and director, describing herself as a facilitator:

'I see myself as talking from the third person, not as a self-portrait ... I use my self-image in a more disembodied way. I am having a conversation with the female body: I am in two positions at once as model and author. The use of the self is almost like a ruse.'⁴

From the very beginning of Rrap's use of the camera, then, she was acutely interested in the role of witness, rather than the role of subject. Even though her images are often of herself, they are so deconstructed that the very notion of a unified subject is dissolved. In her exploration of a body double, she becomes an interloper and an impersonator. Her works demonstrate that 'the body becomes its gender through a series of acts which are renewed, revised and consolidated through time'.⁵ Rrap's expression of this is manifested through her subversive repetition of performance processes in the work. There is nothing 'natural' about Rrap's use of her self-image. Rather, her body-images express the idea that the human form is not simply a reflection of its cultural context, but is constituted and marked by such.⁶ Photography provides the means for 'disclosing'

this sociosexual history of the female nude and, in Rrap's hands, is used to defeat the apparatus, freeing both the artist and the viewer from the rules of the medium and its technology. Through varied levels and types of interactivity, Rrap and her audience are in conversation and, indeed, at play with the body and its double.

The ethical questions that arise in any depiction of the body are further tested by Rrap when she fragments and mutates its forms. Our culture worships a body that is whole, complete, with identifiable and so-called 'normal' limits. The dismembered body has traditionally been regarded as 'grotesque', where 'the boundaries between body and world and those between individual bodies are much less differentiated and more open'.⁷ In the grotesque body, there is an intermingling with both the internal body and the external world. The boundaries are more fluid; the outer and inner limits of the body are challenged. It has been argued that when a body is not whole, it is always 'in the act of becoming'.⁸ This would seem to imply a body that is always in a state of change or process.

The notion of process – a body that is undergoing a set of changes, either through performance, or through the sculptural methods of casting – is something that has featured in the work of Rrap. As in *Body Rub* 1-6 (2006) where Rrap distorted the surface of



Left

Julie Rrap: *360 Degree Self-Portrait*
(stills) 2009
single-channel digital video, silent
10:42 minutes, edition 2/3
Museum of Contemporary Art,
donated through the Australian
Government's Cultural Gifts
Program by Andrew and
Cathy Cameron, 2011

images of herself with cast rubber sculptures of her own head, the artist simultaneously performs on and with the body, approaching the subject of the nude from a distinctly post-conceptual and feminist perspective. That is, the subject is not presented as a unified and unambiguous entity, but one that is fractured, abject, and always in a state of continual materialisation and dematerialisation. In the spirit of the trickster, misbehaving and overstepping the accepted margins, or limits, of the body, Rrap uses body parts to transgress our conventional understanding of the human form. She does this with an ethical stance, quite conscious of the effects that technological advances have had on the image and sanctity of human beings, while at the same time working from a feminist perspective against more conventional 'othering' of the female form.

In *360° Self-Portrait* (2009) Rrap has filmed her head undergoing extreme stress, and yet it appears entirely still. Blood rises to the surface, and the face distorts, taking on the appearance of age and an urgent sense of precarity. As if caught in the loop of materialisation and dematerialisation, this 'portrait' reveals less than it conceals. Rrap has commented:

In *360° Self-Portrait* there is mystery behind the action or affect that the person (the artist) appears to be undergoing: it is difficult to determine whether the subject is responding to something outside or inside of themselves. Are they undergoing something or perceiving something?

There is a 'leap into the void' that this work asks of the viewer, which finds its equivalent in the famous photographic image by Yves Klein, *La peinture de l'espace se jette dans*

le vide (1960). This image ‘appears’ to document the artist leaping from a balcony or rooftop into the street below. Caught in mid-flight, his image remains forever in a state of suspension. There is trickery at play in this image which remains caught within history as an open question, one where the photograph acts as proof, but cultivates doubt.

This paradox resonates in *360° Self-Portrait* where time and movement ‘appear’ suspended within the intensity of presence; an intensity in which the viewer feels both intimacy and separateness.⁹ For Rrap, then, the partial body is both a contemporary aesthetic form and an ethical construction that reflects upon the ways in which our bodies really do intermingle with the world around us. Porous, excessive and oozing with a sense of tease and trickery, this body oversteps the margins of bodily comfort, taking us into the zone of transgression.

Extract first published in *Julie Rrap: Body Double*, (exhibition catalogue), Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, 30 August 2007 – 28 January 2008

Notes

- 1 Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, ‘Fifteen years of feminist action: from practical strategies to strategic practices’, *Framing Feminism: Art and the Women’s Movement 1970–1985*, Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock (ed), Pandora Press, London and New York, 1987, p 54
- 2 Flusser Vilém, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, Anthony Mathews (trans), Reaktion Books, London, 2000
- 3 Interview with the author, 2006
- 4 Interview with the author, 2006
- 5 Judith Butler, ‘Performative acts and gender constitution: an essay in phenomenology and feminist theory’, *Feminist Theory Reader, Local and Global Perspectives*, Carole R McCann and Seung-Kyung Kim (ed), Routledge, NY and London, 2003, p 418
- 6 Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2004, p 23, 28
- 7 Claudia Benthien, *Skin: On the Cultural Border between Self and the World*, Thomas Dunlap (trans), Columbia University Press, NY, 2002, p 38
- 8 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, Helene Iswolsky (trans), Indiana University Press, Bloomington 1994, as cited in Claudia Benthien, op cit, p 317
- 9 Julie Rrap, artist’s statement, *The Trickster*, Victoria Lynn (ed), Geyonggi Museum of Art, Korea, 2010, p 185

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30 August 2007 –
28 January 2008