

THE UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

**MATRIX: ASPECTS OF IDENTITY**

A Written Accompaniment to the Thesis Exhibition

by

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## **Dedication**

This support paper is dedicated to the memory of Anne Severson. It was with great sadness that I heard of her sudden passing in the week and a half before my oral examination. Anne's contribution to this paper was immeasurable and it is because of her support and preparation that I was able to realize this level of excellence. One of her last instructions to me was to celebrate my achievement. My only wish is that she could have been there to share it. I have lost a mentor and a friend. She will be greatly missed.

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### **Art Exhibited in the 2000 MFA Exhibition *Knock Loudly***

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## **Matrix - Aspects of Identity Construction**

### **A. Introduction**

In my art practice, I look at constructions of identity as viewed through aspects of genetics, psychology, the autobiographical self and the relationship to the Other.

Expanding on more conventional definitions which describe matrix as a womb or a mould, Bracha Lichtenberg-Ettinger defined a matrix as the “multiple and/or partial strata of subjectivity...in which the *non-I* is not an intruder”<sup>1</sup> This gives me an image of the self in its layered complexity, where aspects not identified with the Self, the *non-I*, also give some indications of the individual’s identity, as it is, and with the possibility of what the Self may become. A matrix will provide us with a fluid site within which to examine how individuals may construct identity.

In this paper I will first be looking at the strata of identity, beginning with the smallest physical increment, the genome, and moving to the psychological qualities seen in the emotional development of the individual. I will relate this information to issues within my artistic practice and the work of other artists who have been influential in my work on my thesis such as Gary Schneider, Eva Hesse, and Adrian Piper.

Secondly, with this grounding in the nature and nurture of the unfolding individual, I will look at the role of autobiography, both as a self-created narrative in the formation of an artist's identity and also how it manifests itself in the process of my own art production. In particular, I want to explore issues surrounding biographical readings of women's art, denoting how readings differentiate in male practice and criticism. Again I will relate this to how I view readings of my own work.

Thirdly, I will also examine the interaction that happens when one identity interacts with another. Each of us is rooted in our own cultural context. When we are exposed to the unfamiliar, such as other customs or visual differences, these variances are not identified as part of the Self and thus are bracketed as the non-self, or 'the Other.' To provide a context for this understanding, I will draw from my personal experiences of living and working for a year in Sri Lanka, as well as a visit to New York with a discussion of the resulting art production.

## **B. The Genetic Self**

My fascination with genetics was peaked by a photograph in the *Toronto Star* which depicted a hairless mouse, pink and vulnerable, with an outgrowth on its back in the form of a crude human ear. The article reported that these genetically altered mice were without an immune system so that the human patient could take the transplant without

risking the body's rejection of the foreign matter. Apparently the ear would be surgically removed from the mouse without harming it before being attached to the human patient. It was during this period, in 1995, that I began developing ideas for art involving genetics as a subject.

Late twentieth-century, western culture has seen the aggrandizement of DNA as the predominant determinant of human identity and behaviour since new discoveries in genetic research. The authors of *The DNA Mystique* identify genetic essentialism as that which "...reduces the self to a molecular entity, equating human beings, in all their social, historical, and moral complexity, to their genes."<sup>2</sup> It is understandable that our culture has become fascinated by our genetic heritage with a lot of energy and funding going to the study of the human genome .

Artists have been exploring issues in genetics as a means of contextualizing the new information as it relates to the self. In the exhibition *Gary Schneider: Genetic Self-Portrait*<sup>3</sup>, the artist provides images of his physical self on a microscopic level. There is a sense of great intimacy in his images, a result of the closeness necessary to collect such material. Yet, as he points out, ultimately these images appear generic. Schneider says that, "It was with the addition of my hand prints that the portrait moved from a harvesting of my biological information to an emotional response to the Human Genome Project. I wanted the portrait to be an act of faith inside my anxiety of stepping into the unknown of future biology."<sup>4</sup>



The samples that Schneider provides when viewed do not make apparent that they, in fact, belong personally to Schneider. The confirmation that these samples are of himself needs to come from external sources, such as the laboratory. The artist is unable in this and most cases to confirm the samples are his for himself. With unaided vision these samples of sperm, hair or tumor suppressor gene could belong to anyone. If the lab technicians mislabeled the samples, neither the viewers nor the artist would be able to determine the error. An infallible faith in science aids in the incorporation of these images as parts of the self. The reliance on this type of faith in the 21st century is scarce.

I found my own faith tested when I experienced a sense of alienation after being diagnosed with cervical cancer. It was because of technology that the disease was diagnosed early, and that surgery was feasible to correct the problem. I remember walking around trying to assimilate the information. I did not feel ill and had no tangible proof that I could check for myself to feel or see that the disease actually existed. I had to trust that what the doctors told me - something I did not want to believe. I wondered how well I could know myself if I could not even know that this was occurring within me. Alienated, I felt I was betrayed by my own body.

#### B i) *Self Possession*

The execution of this work (fig. 7) meant that I would subject myself to genetic testing. The Internet was rife with labs that would perform the service for a fee. I made it clear to the lab that I was not interested in the analysis of my genetic sequence but that I was

searching for the image. Since this test is normally used for paternity testing, I was required to bring photo identification. The documentation that accompanied the blood sample sent to the lab in Vancouver included a photocopy of my passport, my right thumbprint and a Polaroid taken by the technician. All of this information was put into a ziplock bag. A seal signed by both the technician and I completed the package which was then put into a courier envelope and sent to a lab. Although the lab assures me of complete confidentiality, I am still disconcerted that I divulged so much personal information, in essence, so much of my Self. This uneasiness increased when the operator I spoke to at the lab said that if I ever need to access the information again they will have it there on file. Could I ever take the information back and make it my own again?

This question raised other questions. Who has the legal or ethical right to the information stored in my genes? Am I only the sum of what is stored in my genes? Is it or isn't it the most essential, intimate part of being? Will it become necessary to copyright our genes? Eugenics has a long history and it is not limited to the ideals promulgated by Nazi Germany. One only has to look to the recent history of Alberta to see that many were sterilized for the "convenience" of society. These questions are not new but I feel compelled to frame this type of questioning visually, outside of the cool rationalizations of science.















































































































