

**Identity and difference without opposition - constructing and exposing
strategic subjectivities for social comic comment**

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COMPULSORY DECLARATION

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Abstract

This explication is an investigation into comedy as a medium for constructing strategic subjectivities and the potential that comedy holds for diffusing experiences of difference in contemporary South African contexts. Our culture is one that encounters difference and often experiences these moments as threatening. Comedy creates the opportunity for engagement with other subjective experiences, however, this potential is in my opinion, mostly wasted and performances tend instead to support the dominant social discourse. By examining the nature of subjectivity and identity within a postmodern, technologically connected culture, the active agency of the audience is kindled by the performer. The strategies of this encounter are discussed in relation to Lawrence Mintz's theories of the licensed spokesperson and the negative exemplar.

Chapter One commences with a select examination of difference in contemporary South African Society. This is followed by an exploration of notions of subjectivity and the features of subjectivity that I will engage with; my primary source of reference here is anthropological theorist, Sherry Ortner. Thereafter subjectivity is used as a means for questioning and understanding identity in South African society and how strategically constructed subjectivities can be used as a vehicle for social comic commentary. Chapter Two proceeds with a brief investigation into comic personas and characters as constructed subjectivities and examples of subjective experiences. Further to this I begin to engage specifically with the female voice and the role of the female comic in the exposition of dynamic subjectivities onstage. Chapter Three examines relevant stylistic characteristics of postmodernism; and in particular the effects of mass media on subjectivity, subjective agency and identity. I conclude with an examination of the work of *Prisch Productions* in exploring identity and difference in contemporary South African society, without creating opposition.



Prisch Productions' logo: Heidi- the Laughing Hyena

Introduction

This inquiry stems from a desire to explore the relationship between subjective agency and lived experience in South African society through the medium of comedy. It is my assertion that the stage persona of the comedic actor, as well as comic characters are strategically constructed subjectivities. To this end, their presentation on stage allows for an exposition and exploration of difference and similarity in our subjective experiences without creating threatening oppositions, or re-enforcing damaging stereotypes.

It is my observation that in contemporary South African society, difference is experienced as oppositional and threatening. The ‘other’ still provokes fear and consequently perpetuates prejudicial thinking around notions of difference. I propose that comedy, particularly stand-up comedy, is a mediating vehicle through which audiences can begin to view other, diverse subjectivities, without experiencing these differences as oppositional.

Laughing at fear has become my secret cure: laugh at fear and put it in perspective. It’s always going to be there, but once it has a name, it also has a place.
(Uys: 1. 2002)

As a white, middle class, South African female I speak from a particular subjective position in South African society. The terms - White, middle class, South African, female – influence my understanding and interpretation of the world around me and consequently the work that I create. This is especially relevant because I am one of the minority of female voices generating work within a male dominated context. In 2006 I co-founded a theatre company called *Prisch Productions* with current Masters candidate, Anne Hirsch. The company creates work that, although not specifically grounded in feminist discourse, consciously seeks to present a broad spectrum of female subjective experience. The performances claim the particular value of female lived experiences and in so doing create opportunities for a diverse range of

subjectivities to be presented onstage for comic critique. This will be examined in greater detail later in the paper.

This dissertation is the explication of ideas leading to the realisation of my thesis production, Click-X-cess. Throughout the paper I make observations and assertions based on the research that I will ultimately practice. Click-X-cess will fulfil most of these ambitions, stylistically and in content, however not all of the theory I explore in this paper will be expressed in the final production.

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Chapter One:

- **Difference and Contemporary South African Contexts**

Now that political liberation is a reality in South Africa, the concomitant need for personal, economic and cultural liberation is more evident. Racism, in all its guises, is a wedge that separates people and limits possibilities for common identification and mutual co-operation.
(Sonn: 1. 1996)

In the above quote Julian Sonn specifically addresses the legacy of Apartheid and racism in South Africa, however the areas of difference in South African society that interest me extend beyond racial opposition. While the repercussions of institutionalised racism continue to be felt in South African society, experiences of difference and opposition are not confined to race alone. South Africans confront difference daily- racial, sexual, cultural, linguistic, economic- and these differences continue to be experienced as difficult and often painful. This is why I regard it as essential that opportunities to address issues surrounding difference be created. It is my belief that comedy is an ideal vehicle for beginning to explore issues of difference and to reveal the fears and prejudices associated with the 'other' without the audience feeling threatened, so that ultimately we can move beyond them.

The aftermath of Apartheid continues to be felt in many areas in contemporary South African Society and this is most clearly evidenced in the enormous gap in economic circumstance between various racial groups. The ramifications of these fiscal disparities are particularly interesting when one begins to examine South African society in the light of postmodernism, capitalism and consumer culture.

In a capitalist society, consumer culture incessantly throws up issues of difference. Notions of superior and inferior status have shifted to include questions of consumption and appearance. In a digitised world that is increasingly media driven and obsessed with image, notions of how we 'should' look, behave and consume (certainly among the younger, middle class generation) bring into play questions of

how identity and culture is constructed, assimilated and assumed. In this space individuals are able to exercise their active subjective agency and strategically construct and reconstruct their identity according to the whims of consumer culture. (Ortner 2005)

Subjectivity and subjective agency in consumer society operates on various levels: from the unfixed and constantly changing elements of an image that individuals wish to present to the world, to the more stable elements of identity, where complex systems of belief operate in shaping the individual subjectivity and the way in which people come to understand their world. In consumer society individuals can begin to define themselves on a superficial level according to actual objects they purchase. Value and worth are attributed to specific brand names as representative of aspects of the self. It is within and around this demographic of contemporary South African society that I wish to engage via the work of *Prisch Productions*.

Culture acts as a screen between a person and a social reality, colouring it in such a way that his or her interpretation and understanding of reality may be totally different from that of a person of another culture.
(Groenewald: 14. 1996)

There is a great diversity of choice when constructing subjective viewpoints, but this does not lessen concerns with the issue of otherness or with an identity that is in opposition to our own conceptions of belief. While individuals can manage and shape their identities with unprecedented choice and reflexivity, the existence of meta-narratives at play upon our subjectivities is not negated. I am a white middle class female; consequently these overriding sensibilities will inform my subjective viewpoint and impact on my agency in society. This is evidenced in the work of *Prisch Productions* so far: the subject positions we are most comfortable in constructing and critiquing are the ones which we understand most intimately- that of young, urban, technologised, consumer culture.

It is precisely in the moments when the other is confronted that threatening oppositions can come into play. No matter how subtle the notions of opposition may

be, they still carry with them a threat to one's own subjective viewpoint resulting in fear and prejudice towards the other.

Selective perception takes place when people deliberately avoid certain events or take pains to encounter specific other events. Put differently, people tend to block or avoid receiving messages they do not like.
(Groenewald: 14.1996)

It is by creating opportunities for such experiences to happen in a safe environment, where the exposition of other subjectivities can be seen in a non-threatening way, that the active agency therein can begin to operate, shifting the dangers associated with the other to a non-oppositional perspective. Awareness of our subject positions provides the opportunity to see the other anew and understand difference without attaching values of better or worse or even frightening.



**Digitally Manipulated Image for press package advertising “Face-IT” at Kalk Bay Theatre 2008:
The Prisch duo and their characters at work**

- **Subjectivity and Identity**

Difference begins when two individuals with different belief systems, understandings or experiences of the world meet and discover a divergence of subjectivity; consequently opposition is often thrown up. Particularly in South Africa where difference is historically and politically loaded, the experience can be emotionally painful and may even lead to physical violence at the extreme. It is in these moments that we can find the opportunity to demystify difference, and to acknowledge the pain and fear associated with these experiences. Comedy is an excellent vehicle for problematising these moments as the medium allows a safe distance from the subject matter through laughter. While comedy can often be viewed as confrontational, it is my argument that the mediating effect of humour can allow a sense of irreverence, thus making the confrontation of the material or subject matter non-threatening. The performance may create a space for subjective encounters and objective reflection that is not felt as oppositional.

Sherry Ortner in her article Subjectivity and Cultural Critique, (2005) opens by defining her understanding of subjectivity as the “[e]nsemble of modes of perception, affect, thought, desire, fear, and so forth that animate acting subjects. But [she] always mean[s] as well the cultural and social formations that shape, organise and provoke those modes of affect, thought and so on.” (Ortner: 2. 2005)

While Ortner primarily examines subjectivity from an anthropological perspective, I find her article useful in outlining the complexity of this topic. Subjectivity has been understood and explained in many different ways as the examination of culture has shifted theoretical perspectives. While philosophy has been engaged with probing the depths of human understanding and the ways in which we see our world and ourselves, more recent studies seem to shift towards a scientific understanding of subjectivity. This incorporates the anthropological, sociological and psychological sciences in a holistic approach in understanding subjectivity.

By subjectivity I will always mean a specifically cultural and historical consciousness.... I do not mean to exclude various unconscious dynamics... At the individual level I will assume, with Giddens, that actors are always at least 'partially knowing subjects', that they have some degree of reflexivity about themselves, and their desires, and that they have some 'penetration' into the ways in which they are formed by their circumstances.... At the collective level I use the word consciousness as it is used by both Marx and Durkheim: as the collective sensibility of some set of socially interrelated actors. Consciousness in this sense is always ambiguously part of people's personal subjectivities and part of the public culture.
(Ortner: 4. 2005)

Debates on subjectivity explore the role of the individual within society. The individual and society are understood as entities operating both independently and also in conjunction with one another. According to Ortner, Marx and Durkheim subscribed to theories of 'determinism' and 'constraint', Sartre promoted notions of 'freedom' in individual thoughts and perceptions, while Levi-Strauss argued for the individual as subject "upon which and through which 'society' does its work, and which even occasionally puts up a little struggle." (Ibid)

Any examination of subjectivity is profoundly complex, as it must be understood as including, but also as operating within, the broader context of: pre-determinism, freedom, individuality, collectivity and self-reflexivity. Is it the individual who ultimately shapes the social collective, or is the individual created by the society? Society and its cultures are unfixed in the sense that they are in constant flux. Just as fashions and social trends change, so too does an individual's opportunities to exercise their active agency in constructing their identity. Consequently it is the degree to which we can operate with independent agency over these changes that holds interest.

Ortner, in the previous extract, proposes that we as individuals hold the potential to operate with active agency, cognisant of the various influences that act upon us as shaped by specific historical, social, political and cultural circumstances. It follows that each individual thus holds a degree of autonomous choice within their subjectivity and this in turn influences the collective sensibilities of cultures.

It is the notion of reflexivity and active agency of the subject (both personal and collective) that offers up the potential for an exploration of social dynamics and of difference without opposition in contemporary, postmodern society through comedy:

Subjectivity itself also demands increased attention. While modernism proclaimed 'the death of subjectivity', postmodernism attempts to discover new articulations of subjectivity and the means by which it is constituted and expressed. The postmodern subject- that is, the split, multiple, or contradictory 'I'- is thus a decentred one, and so the notion of character is no longer holistic. (Geis: 34. 1995)

Academic theory on the postmodern has identified the emergence of new styles in architecture, art, literature and film. The abandonment of a dominant structure or overriding social narratives is a distinguishing trait of the postmodern. This suggests the possibility of another opportunity for active agency as it allows for a construction of new forms of consciousness. Modern connectivity informs contemporary consciousness, enabling the individual to actively create and select their identities. Consequently the individual shapes culture. Identity in this context can in fact be described as the constructed social mask the individual wears, meaning that it can be fluid even while it forms the basis of interpersonal relationships, this is demonstrated in the rise of online social networks, chat rooms and social utilities.

While postmodern theory articulates shifts in thinking around various artistic genres, it must be understood as a philosophical discourse; lived reality does not necessarily adhere to or display all the characteristics of postmodern thinking. This is evidenced in the experiences of contemporary South Africans where, as previously noted, the meta-narratives of racial difference and gender inequality continue to manifest themselves in the fabric of society. (Groenewald 1996)

The historical and cultural influences that operate upon our subjectivity, as well as our active agency in shaping a value system, are the materials from which we construct our identities. To this end identity transforms. As knowing subjects with the potential

for active agency, we are able to shape and manage our identities with varying degrees of complexity: we are able to understand the systems that affect our subjectivities but furthermore we are able to exercise choice in determining how we can augment our identities by ascribing to certain social trends or influences for example. (Ortner 2005)

Just as individual consciousness evolves and grows, so too does our understanding of notions of identity and culture. We are active agents capable of conscious choice, despite the many meta-narrative structures that remain in place (our race, gender, culture), influencing and shaping our understandings. As quoted from Ortner earlier, subjectivity is in part shaped by “cultural and social formations that shape, organise and provoke those modes of affect, thought and so on” (Ortner: 4. 2005). Even the term ‘culture’ has shifted definition significantly since it was first introduced as a critical concept, making it important to contextualise the meaning of ‘culture’ before discussing how it influences or is influenced by present day subjectivities. Terry Eagleton states in After Theory:

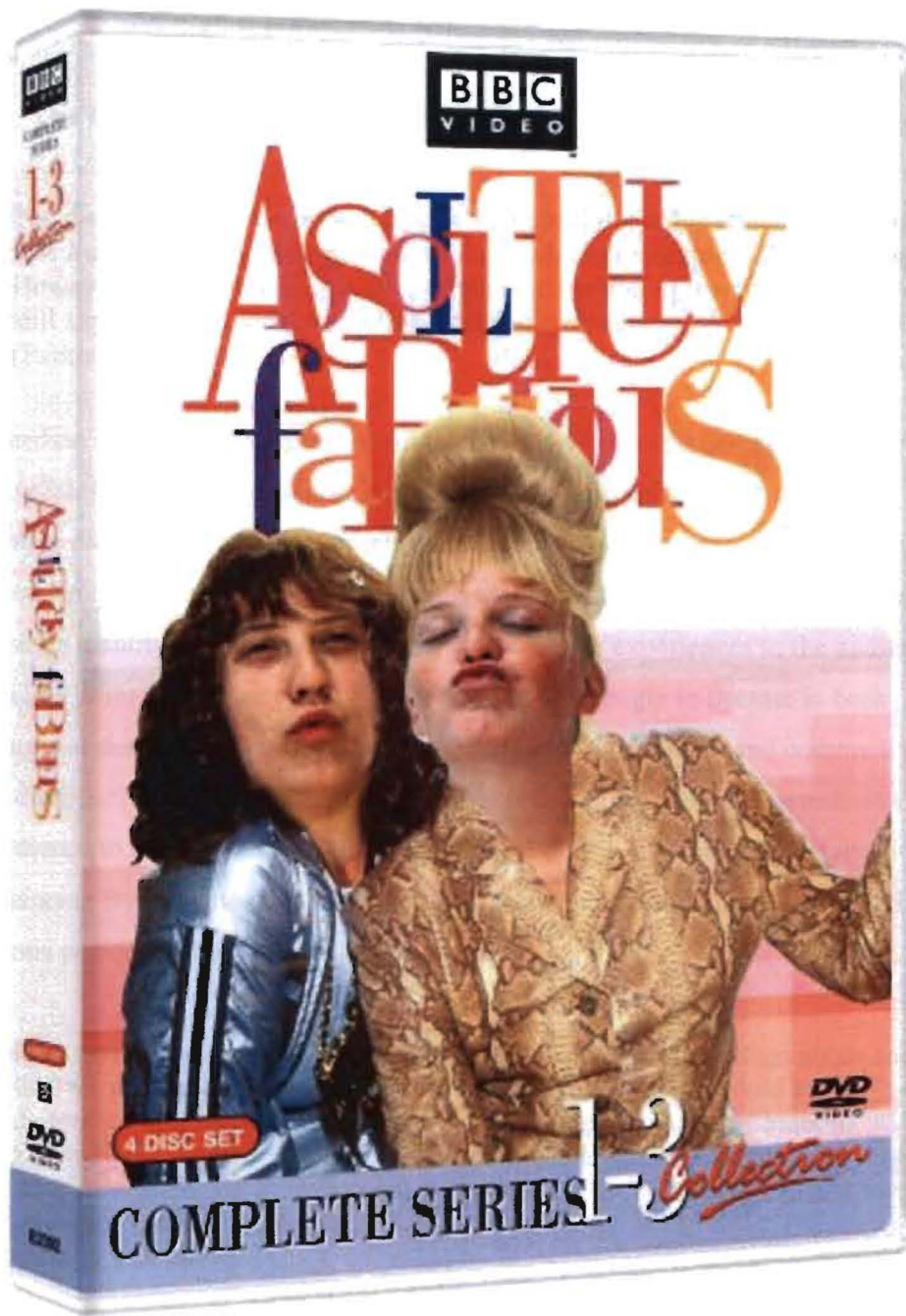
The concept of culture grew up as a critique of middle-class society, not as an ally of it. Culture was about value rather than prices, moral rather than the material, the high-minded rather than the philistine... By the 1960's and 70's, however, culture was also coming to mean film, image, fashion, lifestyle, marketing, advertising, the communications media... Culture in the sense of value, symbol, language, art, tradition and identity was the very air which new social movements like feminism and Black Power breathed... [It] also paved the way for the rampant consumerist culture of the 1980's and 90's.
(Eagleton: 24-25. 2004)

Eagleton suggests that culture is both born out of and in reaction to the society it defines. Culture is thus illustrated as inherently connected to both individual and collective subjectivities, and consequently identity.

In a postmodern context the systems of meaning that inform our understanding of ourselves as individuals and as part of a greater whole, are fractured, destabilised, fragmented, commodified, digitised and constantly changing. In this consumer culture

and particularly in the postmodern context we have the ability to exercise our agency and construct our identities, thus asserting some measure of conscious action over our 'world view': "World view can be described as a culture's orientation towards such things as God, man, nature, the universe and other philosophical issues that are concerned with the concept of being." (Groenewald: 17. 1996)

Powered by the mass media, any individual in our society who is exposed to television, print media, the internet, radio, billboards or even product packaging- is offered endless alternatives of what is desirable or attainable. We are able to construct our identities, exercise our choice and self-reflexivity to a degree hitherto unseen. In this space where identity is a conscious construct and cultural values and practices can be assumed, there exists great opportunity for social comic comment. Our understanding of the autonomy we have in creating and interpreting our world offers fertile ground for commenting on and critiquing these choices. How do we choose to see each other and how do we choose to present ourselves? Particularly as within a consumer culture we seem to increasingly aim for the appearance of autonomy and individuality, seemingly subverting the very system that we consume and are thus an active part of perpetuating.



**Digitally manipulated image for University of Cape Town Postgraduate
Research Day presentation 2007:
Presenting and parodying the Prisch duo**

Chapter Two:

- **The Comic persona-A Subjective Identity**

Stand-up comedy presupposes a performer speaking to the audience... most stand-up comedians use a persona through which they express their humour. However this persona is usually a heightened version of themselves, and they still express their thoughts, feeling, and perceptions.
(Parker: 25. 2002)

A comedian imparts certain kinds of subjective knowledge and perceptions which can impact directly upon the audience. In essence, the comic persona and comic characters played by the comedian represent a subjective viewpoint or express the lived experiences of the subject. This means that the comic can strategically construct an onstage identity revealing and offering up subjective experiences to the audience. It is at this point that active agency in the audience can begin to operate in both viewing and demystifying difference. The comic can both present and comment upon diverse subjectivities or lived experiences, and in so doing, give tacit permission to the audience to employ active agency in understanding a different subjectivity without experiencing it as threatening or oppositional. Lawrence Mintz discerns two social functions performed by the stand-up comedian:

First that of licensed spokesperson who is permitted to say things about society that we want and need to have uttered publicly, but which would be too dangerous and too volatile if done so without the mediation of humour. Second that of negative exemplar, the comic character who represents traits which the audience wants to hold up to ridicule, to feel superior to and to renounce through laughter.
(Mintz: 1-3. 1977)

While Mintz asserts that in order for the comic to become a negative exemplar, they must behave in such a way as to draw ridicule and place the audience in a superior status to the comic. I would argue that the negative exemplar can also be used to draw feelings of empathy from the audience; creating moments where the viewer can identify with the experiences of the comic or comic character; and in so doing soften

judgments of superiority or inferiority in the encounter. Consequently the experience of difference as threatening to ones own subject position is diluted. The comic is both the licensed spokesperson and the negative exemplar, modifying both roles to include subjective experiences.

Thus reading 'symptomatically' and beyond the initial stage event, each epoch of character representation- that is each substantial change in the way character is represented on the stage and major shift in relationship of character to other elements of dramatic construction or theatrical presentation- constitutes at the same time the manifestation of change in the larger culture concerning the perception of self and the relations of self to the world. 'Character' is a word that stands in for the entire human chain of representation and reception that theatre links together.

(Fuchs: 8. 1996)

I agree with Fuchs and include both the comic persona of the comedian as well as comic characters presented on stage by the comic as a part of the "chain of representation" (Ibid) of subjectivity and subjective experience. Comic personas and characters are constructions that can expose dynamic subjectivities onstage and in so doing remind the audience of their active agency in shaping their subject positions and constructing their own identities. Because of this, it is my assertion that South African comics should begin to shift the territory of their personas, comic characters and material in order to showcase a more diverse range of subjectivities and lived experiences. Otherwise they will merely continue to "advance the ritual and interest of traditional culture" (Mintz: 3. 1997).

This is where my personal identity as a woman intersects with my desire to create comic works that allow for an exploration of difference without opposition. In a primarily patriarchal society where the male voice, and in particular the voice of white males is arguably still historically and economically empowered, comedy is an excellent vehicle to open opportunities for female subjectivities and the female "chain of representation" (Fuchs: 8. 1996) to be explored.

- **The Female Comic Voice: a growing multi-vocal chorus of female subjectivity.**

As a female writer and director working primarily with a female comic performer the role of the female comic within contemporary South African society holds interest for me both personally and academically. It is my assertion that in order to begin to present more diverse subjectivities for comic critique; female South African comics need to shift their personas, characters and material into broader, more dynamic subject areas, rather than reinforcing 'reliable', overused female comic clichés.

It is my observation when attending open mic nights, comedy festivals, theatre shows and when watching television series or movies, that many female comic performers employ stereotypes in creating their personas and when shaping their material; such as the 'dumb blonde', 'naïve virgin' or 'man hating bitch'. In so doing the dominant status quo is reinforced and stereotypes remain unchallenged. Furthermore these prejudices ultimately lead to intolerance.

Resistance to the dominant at the level of the individual subject is the first stage in the production of alternative forms of knowledge, or where such alternatives already exist, of winning individuals over to these discourses and gradually increasing their social power.
(Parker: 18. 2002)

When South African female comics base their characters and personas in direct opposition to, or in accordance with the patriarchal male voice, they are inadvertently foregrounding the female subjective experience as one that must exist only in opposition to the male. In so doing their mere presence onstage undermines my primary objective- to present varied subjectivities for comic exploration or exposition.

Comics are licensed spokespersons able to satirise, comment on and finally shape and challenge the conventional discourse. Taken with the negative exemplar's ability to give voice to their subjective experience and concerns within society it follows that female South African comics must re-define their personas to represent a broader

spectrum of female subjective experience, claiming the power and value of their lived experiences. In so doing, they will begin to create opportunities for a diverse range of subjective experiences to be presented onstage not merely in opposition to a dominant discourse, but as equal and valid.

“I have always played my sexuality and femininity, using that as a base from which I could be rude or butch or scary or... you get the picture.”
(Noble: Interview, date unknown)

In the above quote Irit Noble, stand-up comic and cabaret performer states that her sexuality and gender is the base for her performance persona. In my view Noble places herself in opposition to the male discourse by foregrounding the male voice- thus giving it primacy and power. In so doing she devalues her voice. Noble feels that in order for her voice to be heard; her persona must alternately eschew feminine characteristics by becoming ‘butch’ or aggressive, ‘scary’ and ‘rude’ (Ibid). In juxtaposing traditional male and female qualities, Noble implicitly reinforces the dominant status quo, therefore failing to allow the opportunity for alternative subjectivities around sexuality and femininity to be revealed and proving the following point:

If women do not embrace the possibilities of different discourses, they limit themselves to being perceived in terms of narrow stereotypes that characterise the dominant discourse.
(Parker: 23. 2002)

Gilda Blacher, a popular female comedian in South Africa in the 1990’s also chooses to use her sexuality in her routines, attracting the audience’s attention, emphasising her femininity to ‘play up’ her gender. Blacher differs from Noble in that when she foregrounds her body in the performance she subverts the audience’s expectations by revealing a strong wit with satirical observations about the world around her. Her onstage persona and characters show dynamic representations of women that branch away from obvious stereotypes.

In performance Blacher often uses different characters in-between her more traditional, heightened self, stand-up routine to present different female experiences that go beyond easily identifiable and regularly used clichés. Thus Blacher depicts dynamic subjectivities of women, allowing for a multitude of possibilities and divergent female voices. She renders stereotypes unstable and challenges preconceptions of both herself as a female comedian and as a licensed spokesperson or representative of women. Her persona and character choices are made to specifically steer her performance away from employing obvious stereotypes; if she does use these stereotypes, she does so consciously and in a visibly satirical way-revealing them to be absurd one dimensional representations of female subjectivity.

Shirley Kirschmann's one women show Train Your Man (Kirschmann: 2006) is a character driven show with elements of stand-up. "Hettie", the main character, has been injured by one too many men and transforms herself into a hard-nosed dominatrix type, considering all men to be animals. Hettie has power only when she begins to assert herself as male- the civilized patriarch. All is resolved at the end when Hettie reclaims her role of the passive female and it is only at this point that the character can achieve happiness, but at the cost of her personal power.

Shirley Kirschmann comes on stage in a camouflage, halter top thingie, and she's holding something resembling a riding crop. Kirschmann talks about how men are like dogs and need to be trained – literally. The lecture seminar is interspersed with "case studies"; the actor becomes different embittered female characters (usually a "man" is the root cause)... The weakness of the show is the dated gender politics. I'm a man...so...therefore...I watch too much football, don't do the dishes, and have never heard of the term foreplay? Really? Isn't there anything else we can talk about? I guess not.
(Bell: 1. 2006)

In Train Your Man Kirschmann illustrates the difficulty of employing stereotypes. On one hand her intention may be to subvert audiences' expectations by performing in opposition to culturally acceptable constructions of femininity; but on the other she

consciously locates her characters in alignment with the dominant patriarchal discourse as primarily influenced by the middle to upper class white male. Lindiwe Matshikiza won a South African Comedy Award in 2007 for Best One Person Show and was nominated for Best Breakthrough Act for her performance in Mike Van Graan's one-person political satire Bafana Republic (Van Graan: 2007) which was directed by Lara Bye. Throughout the production Matshikiza makes lightning quick changes between characters, both male and female, speaking directly to the audience about their various experiences of, or opinions around, the impending World Football Cup to be hosted by South Africa in 2010.

While this production is character based, by casting a woman in this role Bye and Van Graan do not foreground any particular gender discourse but acknowledge the comic abilities and voice of a female performer as valid and capable of representing both genders. Matshikiza drives her performance based on the material- showcasing a variety of subjective viewpoints- and does so without first positioning her voice in opposition to or in alignment with another discourse, thus claiming the value and power of her voice on its own merits.

Comedians don't get good until they stop trying to be funny, and instead identify their own personal point of view, mining the humor within that. There's nothing more exciting than going on stage, armed only with your observations on something ... and having the audience erupt in laughter after you point out the previously unnoticed--but now abundantly obvious--absurdities.
(Ajaye in Johnson: 3. 2003)

Ellen DeGeneres, a highly successful female, American stand-up comedian, locates her comedy in the domestic territory of her lived experience, making gently satirical observations of the ridiculous ironies of everyday life. DeGeneres carefully chooses her material for its universal appeal; she unfolds a world where everyone can enjoy "the healing power of laughter regardless of race, gender or sexual preference."
(Lavin: 123. 2004)

DeGeneres consciously chooses the terrain of her daily life in order to not politicise or orientate her work around any immediately recognisable discourses that would stereotype her. DeGeneres primarily aims to be a writer who makes people laugh: “You know, all I ever wanted to do was, you know, be a funny person.” (DeGeneres in Lavin: 124. 2004)

The debate on subjectivity has been one of the most fraught of the past twenty years, especially in the early 1980's, when feminists were vociferous in pointing out that just as women were beginning to achieve the status of subjects- the power to wield the 'I'- male theorists were declaring the position vacant. Craig Owen's groundbreaking 1983 article describing feminism as a postmodern discourse initially met with a cool reception from feminists. By the late 1980's however, feminists and queer theorists were generally finding poststructuralist theories of subjectivity viable.
(Fuchs: 3-4. 1996)

By showing that alternate subjectivities can only exist in opposition to others, comics perpetuate the experience of difference and change as threatening or painful. This is not to say that female comics cannot share their subjective experiences of being treated as lesser persons or of being apportioned with stereotypical roles and characteristics. However if these qualities are the regularly repeated ones that female comics assume, or if they do not consciously use their roles of negative exemplar and licensed spokesperson to overtly critique and ridicule these clichés; then prejudicial knowledge is the only kind they will impart.

Female comedians in South Africa have the ability and opportunities to exploit the active agency of subject position in order to begin to explore difference without opposition, not only through the content and subject of their material, but through their personas and characters. Contemporary female comics must acknowledge their voices as a discourse that is esteemed within and of itself, by displaying dynamic subjectivities that reflect authentic, lived realities and experiences of people within society.

This is the territory that I hope to explore through *Prisch Productions*- a terrain that does not need to orientate itself in a position relative to any hegemonic discourse, but rather acknowledges and foregrounds the individual experience, regardless of race, age, sexual orientation, class or language, as valuable in its own right. It is my intention to create work that offers varied subjectivities, viewpoints and lived experiences for comic critique; thus commenting on our society as a whole and in so doing allow the audience to be exposed to difference without experiencing it as threatening or oppositional; and in so doing it is my hope that comedy can begin to “establish an arena for what might be named freedom of comedic expression, in which laughter can resonate.” (Parker: 27. 2002)

KALK BAY THEATRE

Face-IT

presented by



*Prisch*TM
Productions



You have 9957 friends
currently online

- Events (about)
- Free Gifts (about)
- Graffiti (about)
- Groups (about)
- Marketplace (about)
- Notes (about)
- Photos (about)
- Poke Pro (about)
- Posted Items (about)
- Super Wall (about)



directed by Alicia Price starring Anne Hirsch

▼ Friends

Vera Voice



Moira Mom



Tessa Techie



Spicy Sally



▼ The Wall



- Holy flippen **WOW** guys,
a show about the interweb!
Don't be kak, book now!
- Twakkie



- Seriously, I don't even
know these people and
they keep poking me.
- Alan Committie

20 feb-16 March WEDNESDAYS to SATURDAYS
BOOKINGS: 0732205430

Poster advertising "Face-IT" at the Kalk Bay Theatre 2007

Chapter Three:

- **Young, Urban, Technologised Culture: Media and the Postmodern World**

Is TV the real world of Postmodern culture which has entertainment as its ideology, the spectacle as its emblematic sign of the commodity form, lifestyle advertising as its popular psychology, empty seriality as the bond which unites the simulacrum of the audience, electronic images as its most dynamic, and only form of social cohesion... the diffusion of a network of relational power as its real product?

(Croker and Cook in Kaplan: 35. 1998)

A primary characteristic of our digitised society is mass media, the barrage of images to which we are exposed is constant and endless. The choices available to us in the realm of virtual reality and the illusions perpetuated by celebrity culture and corporate organisations are extensive – the internet, chat rooms, social networks, and mobile networks provide us with the opportunity to apparently become whoever we want and be in communication with anyone else being whoever they want to be, at any time, anywhere in the world. As Eagleton asserted, culture is contextual and unfixed and in this media-driven society it has become an extension of identity- we are able to ascribe to or assume elements of culture that we view as necessary in shaping a desirable identity. Similarly we can interact with identities that we view as pleasing, which further perpetuates the effects of othering. We avoid that which is different to what we understand as normal and can come to experience these differences as oppositional and possibly threatening.

Identity is malleable, we choose to subscribe to what is sought after in the moment, assimilating the new and discarding elements of our old self in order to improve, upgrade and keep in step with what has the greatest cultural value in our eyes. Consumerist culture allows us to assume that which best assists us in defining or shaping our identity as we choose it to be.

New types of consumption; planned obsolescence; an ever more rapid rhythm of fashion and styling changes; the penetration of advertising, television and media

to a hitherto unparalleled degree throughout society; the replacement of the tension between city and country, centre and province, by the suburb and by universal standardisation.

(Jameson: 15. 1988)

It is not my intention to imply that by choosing how to shape ourselves according to fashion individuals have lost or abandoned any sense of consciousness or autonomy; nor that society as a whole has become a completely mindless slave to trend. Rather this phenomenon of choice and change is what drives the individual to exercise autonomy within a range of subjective experiences more than ever. Individuals are able to piece together their subjective identities from a range of sources, physical, philosophical, cultural, global and virtual. Understanding the complex systems in which we operate has become the balancing act of forging contemporary identity. Subjective experience continues to operate under the aegis of society whilst symbiotically referencing the self.

It is in these moments, where different subject positions confront one another and opposition is discovered, that comic constructions on stage can offer the opportunity for the viewer to be consciously challenged in terms of active agency, re-examining his or her collection of ideas and understandings of difference and identity. In this way difference can be demystified and shown as another separate but equally valid subjective experience of the world.

I am particularly intrigued by the emergence of shorter texts symptomatic of the postmodern sensibility. These texts or meaning makers are multi-referential, layered and characterised by montage and pastiche. The images that the media flashes across our consciousness are fragmented, often disjointed and non-narrative. Our digitised, postmodern world “rejects totalising meta-narratives and celebrates complexity, self-reflexivity, fragmentation, doubt, ambiguity, relativism and pastiche” (Stott: 152. 2005)

It is in television and particularly the music video where the effects of pastiche and montage can be most successfully examined. In music videos the constant stream of

jumbled signifiers that flash across the screen reduce loaded indicators to a more superficial level. “Abandoning the binary oppositions of high and low culture, masculine and feminine or between past, present and future, verbal and visual” (Kaplan: 36. 1988). They engage the audience primarily through visceral reaction and in so doing create a space for subversive subjective positions.

“More than ever the realm of everyday consciousness becomes one whose significations are indistinguishable from the images, spectacles and messages that circulate through mass media and mass culture.” (Polan: 45. 1988) Aesthetically and stylistically pastiche and montage challenge the accepted status quo. They reformat our historical understandings of structure, showing them in new ways or progressing beyond them. The multi-textural layers of meaning reference the possibility of alternative subjective positions and begin to create a space in art where the questions or issues at hand do not take their shape solely from running counter to the dominant system “but are anti-essentialist and plural. Discourses are not hierarchically ordered and differences such as gender can be transcended. Metaphysical categories of difference no longer exist.” (Kaplan: 35-36. 1988) Instead the comedy created through these stylistic elements generates a utopian space where conceptions of otherness are not fore-grounded and different subjectivities are offered the room to exist without opposition.

If television and the world of media is “the real world of the post-modern” (Croker and Cook in Kaplan: 35. 1988) then in order to come to a greater critical understanding of our world, our culture and society, it is necessary to use the language and techniques of these forms. It is here that montage and pastiche provide the ideal aesthetic vocabulary for social comic commentary. By performing material using the semiotic constructs and signifiers that we know and understand (the shorter images, the references and parodies of the original) socio-historical truths are acknowledged and understood whilst allowing an examination of what it is in the ‘now’. In the comedy sketch series Smack the Pony (Talkback, 2000), each episode includes parody of a music video. While they are not always directly referencing a particular

song or video, they comment upon the form, styles and trends of what, at the time of filming, was contemporary. The episodic style of The Catherine Tate Show (BBC, 2003) introduces and revisits different comic characters that represent various experiences of British society, exposing their subjective viewpoints for comic scrutiny.

Seeing our world and our behaviour reflected on stage using techniques with which we have become both familiar and comfortable from mass media – such as the visually stimulating, colourful images and the fast paced, multi-modal editing – allows the audience an easy accessibility and resonance of understanding. As individuals within a greater society we share many lived experiences. Audience members can see their subjective positions in that world, identify their understanding within it and their orientation to it, and thus frame their own subjective viewpoints.

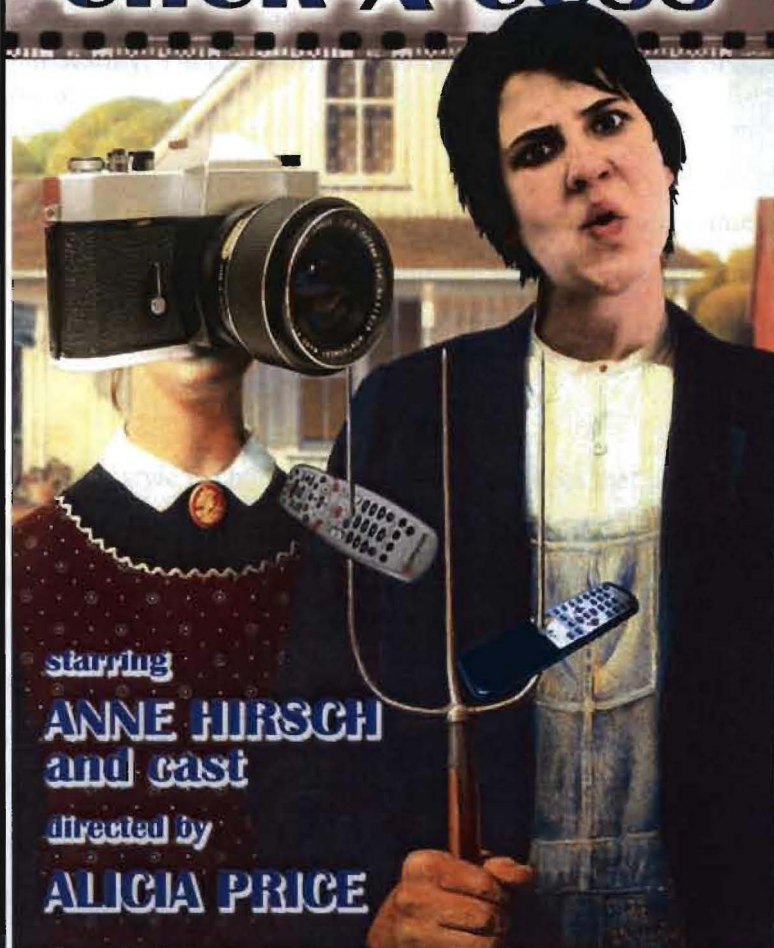
To accept the ways of the world means often to come to terms with a wayward world; to come to terms less than to affix an easy seal of approval than to contemplate the habitual and indeed incurable ironies of life in the world; the laughter we often associate with this observing of waywardness implies something of good nature, some awareness that deviancy is 'normal', some recognition that we ourselves participate in disparateness, that we move in the imperfect scene as well as behold it.
(Heilman, 1978: Epilogue)

Through the vehicle of comedy we can begin to see other subjectivities or subjective experiences of the world in a safe space, we can laugh at them, safely cushioned by the transformative power of the comedy. This can surely open up a space for self-reflexivity; where the greater universality of our lived experiences in society and in our cultures becomes the key to understanding. Universal experience and knowledge offer a common ground and this common ground is rich with comic opportunity; experience and knowledge are the springboards allowing the examination of difference both in terms of the collective and individual subjective experiences of life. This is how difference can begin to be explored in a non-threatening and non-oppositional way: initially on a superficial and less fixed level of identity; but ultimately the provocation of active agency can lead to an examination of the self,

subjective perspective and the more rigid conceptions of belief that comprise our subjectivity and the way in which we understand ourselves and how we relate to the world around us.

Prisch Productions & UCI Drama Department present

click-X-cess



starring
ANNE HIRSCH
and cast
directed by
ALICIA PRICE

22nd - 26th July '08 @ 20h15

ARENA THEATRE

37 ORANGE STREET

021 480 7129



Poster for click-X-cess

- **R.E.S.P.E.C.T- Not just a song by Aretha Franklin: The Work of Prisch so far**

Today more than ever people from different cultures realise that they share a common destiny. They feel the need to develop a strong sense of *South Africaness*.

(Groenewald: 22. 1996)

I have experimented through *Prisch Productions* with constructing strategic subjectivities onstage. The performances comment upon subjectivity and identity using comedy as a means of exploring different perceptions of society in present day South Africa.

Prisch Productions' style is characterised by performances that incorporate multi-media, including film, music and projections, and experiment with multiple performance styles, including stand-up, character sketches and dance routines. In this way, *Prisch Productions* utilises the characteristic forms of post-modernism in keeping with our digitised society. These short sketches and stand up pieces interspersed with multi-media create an episodic style which parallels the emergent trends of destabilised, non-linear narratives that we encounter in music videos, when flipping through television channels or even cinema as seen in the rise of "MTV editing" (Kaplan: 35.1998.) - film shots that are consistently under seven seconds in length.

Theatre here mimics and reflects the omnipresent media and their suggestions of immediacy but at the same time searches for another form of sub-public. Behind an ostensible exuberance, melancholia, loneliness and despair become perceivable. This conspicuous variety of postdramatic theatre often finds its inspiration in the patterns of television and film entertainment and makes references (irrespective of quality) to splatter movies, quiz shows, commercials and disco music, but also to a classical intellectual heritage.

(Lehmann: 118. 2006)

Theatre has begun to reflect the impact that media has upon contemporary society; *Prisch Productions*' style of work uses the characteristic devices that audiences are

accustomed to. This purpose is twofold: firstly, the audience is familiar with signifiers and meaning behind the devices inherent in these forms, thus bringing along with them their own associations and understandings that assist them in buying into the work, associating and reflecting upon the action on stage as it relates to them. Secondly, this intimacy with the form itself opens up a space for critiquing the medium in which the work is presented, thus enabling the audience to employ their active agency in re-examining and critiquing themselves in relation to the world onstage. The audience engage in a reflection and criticism of our real, lived experiences in society.

The spectator follows a course of allusions, citations and counter-citations, insider jokes, motifs from cinema and pop music, a patchwork of often rapid, often minute episodes: ironically distanced, sarcastic, 'cynical', without illusion and 'cool' in tone. Even the most obvious corny joke is preferable to the intolerable and dishonest 'seriousness' of public and official rhetoric. (Lehmann: 119. 2006)

By carefully creating comic characters and stand-up personas to frame subjective viewpoints through comic action, the identities of these characters can be subverted or revealed as something closer to reality. The audience can begin to find resonant points to real subjectivities and lived experiences rather than feeling preached to or even chastised. This allows the work of *Prisch Productions* to expose elements of our own experiences and criticise our own society. These characters hold similarities to our own subjective experiences, and as such they can hold a mirror up to our lives. They can behave in ways that we would never think of or consider possible for ourselves, freeing us to look at situations from a new perspective and allowing opportunities to identify or experience difference in a non-threatening manner.

In the South African multi-cultural society, people have common needs, fears and aspirations. Cultural diversity should not keep people apart. (There is a need) for people to focus on similarities while retaining cultural differences, because only through communication can cultural bridges be built. (Groenewald: 23. 1996)

The comic identities that *Prisch Productions* create can subvert social norms, expose the possible ridiculousness of our behaviour and offer up alternate understandings or interpretations of the other. The intention with these characters is that their choices and actions drive the plot- it is their subjective viewpoint and self-agency that determines their choices. It is how they see their world and choose to interpret or act in it that produces the comedy. In this sense it is the characters' subjectivities and their 'lived' experiences that are being carefully constructed, to be revealed or subverted and consequently opened up for comic critique. The characters' identities serve as the vehicle for comic social comment on our own lived experiences and how we shape our identities; in this way the style is influenced by the British television series' People Like Us (BBC, 2002) and Little Britain (BBC, 2000).

In my minor project Serving Time (2006) we meet the character Susan as she is attending her first speed dating session. As the bell begins to ring increasingly rapidly we see her react not only to each man who sits opposite her but also to the entire experience. She is forced by the shorter and shorter gaps between bell rings to summarise her entire personality, aims, goals, hopes, dreams and history as succinctly as possible. This results in increasingly and alarmingly frank statements of 'who she is'.

"Look, I'm here to meet someone with a similar background, aims hopes and goals as me...

BUZZ

I, uh , aargh

Hi, Susan. I want a soul connection.

At this point the buzzer begins to ring with alarming pace and Susan becomes more and more flustered...

BUZZ

All right, you look relatively healthy.

BUZZ

Look I'm easy and rather supple, must be all that ballet

BUZZ

Okay, health isn't that important...

BUZZ

I suppose looks isn't either

BUZZ

All I want is a man with a big co...

BUZZ
Fine, a big wallet then
BUZZ
Wait!
BUZZ
But!
BUZZ
Come on!
BUZZ
Aaaarghhh!!!!”
(Price: 3-4. 2006)

Here we see Susan unravel as the sheer ridiculousness of her situation, the speed with which she must expose the core of her personality and why she is really there in the first place: not to meet someone she has something in common with and can befriend, nor a life partner, nor even someone who is rich enough to negate most of these needs... Susan’s baser desires and the desperation of her loneliness is exposed, laying her rather more intimate thoughts bare.

Susan’s position in a comically exaggerated situation reveals some of our society’s rules around dating by using our universal understanding of the need for companionship. This exposure allows us to critique our society’s approach to dating and possibly even our own individual judgments of people who utilize dating services.

More often, the accent is on incidental and insignificant situations: parties, TV shows, encounters in a club. From within these situations fantasies, experiences, anecdotes, jokes are told. With the help of slide projectors, photos, acted out scenes, re-enacted dialogues, videos and sound recordings, show elements and narration, all manner of things falling between aggressive triviality and marginalized intelligence are presented.
(Lehmann: 120. 1996)

In *Face-IT* (*Prisch Productions*’ Minor/Medium project collaboration 2007), the character of Tessa Techie represents herself as “techie to the stars, red-carpet ready.” She speaks extensively to the audience about her glamorous lifestyle and celebrity friends whilst leading them through an obviously digitally manipulated slide show of

photographs of herself with her famous friends. Ultimately it is exposed that Tessa is none of the things that she has gone to pains to show herself to be. In our construction of Tessa's character we understood her to be a very lonely and isolated person. People view her as strange and different, the other. She has no real friends (that is, real in the sense that they actually exist). She eats her lunch alone. But Tessa has ambition and a dream; she constructs an entire lifestyle including intimate connections with people that she knows only through the media, inventing an existence that helps her to escape from her mundane life. Thus Tessa's subjectivity exposes how we construct realities or identities to escape our real, lived ones; as well as our society's obsession with celebrity and appearance. We can laugh at Tessa's imaginary friendships and her profound investment in these strangers' lives but simultaneously gain insight into consumer culture's fixation on media and our need to create an escape from painful situations.

Due to the different perceptions of reality and the conflicting viewpoints among individuals and groups in South Africa, an environment needs to be created in which communicating parties can reach consensus on new sets of rules for meaningful communication.
(Groenewald: 23. 1996)

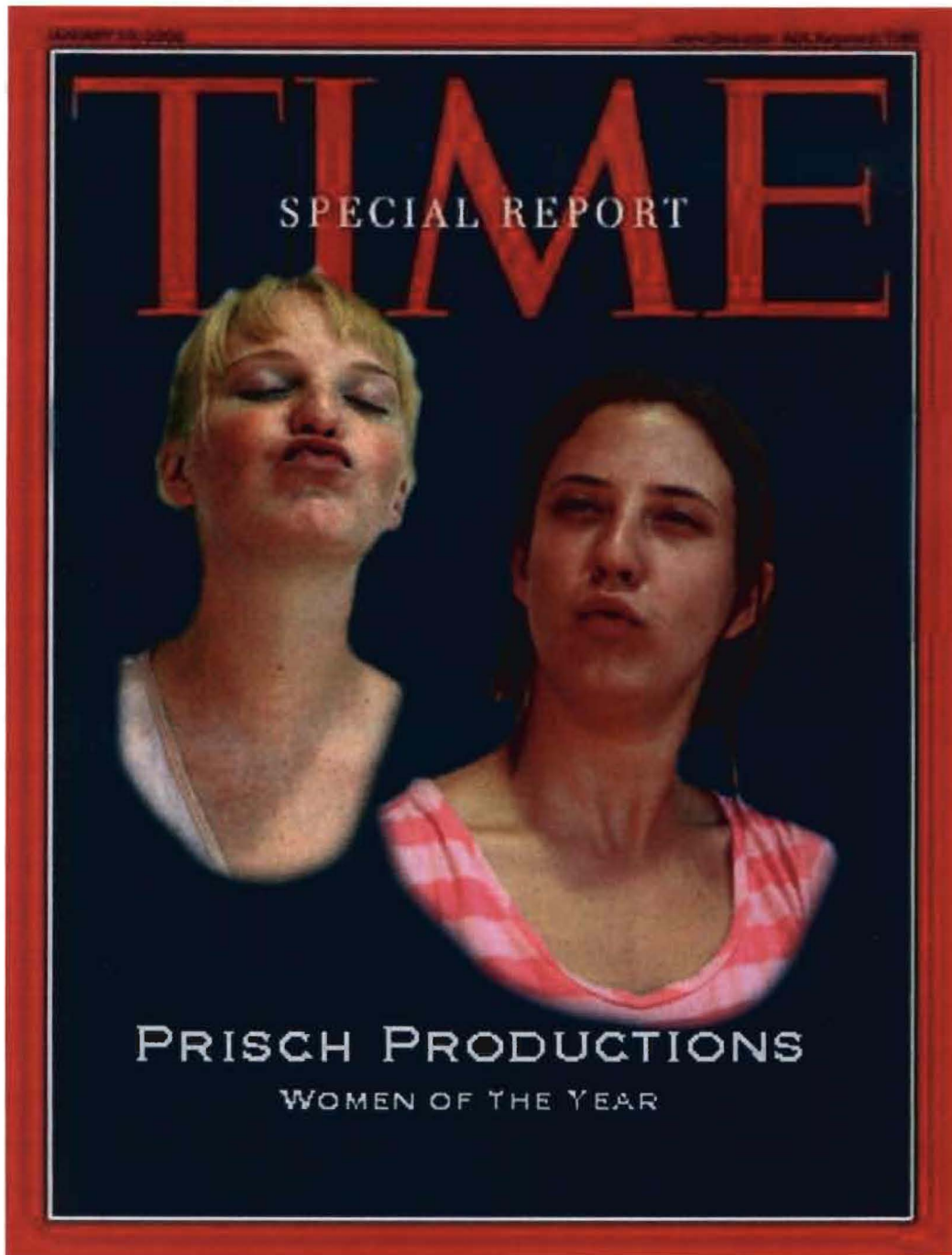
Prisch Productions is involved in an ongoing series of comic interventions on behalf of U.C.T's Respect campaign which is designed to promote the agenda of the Transformation Campaign currently in effect at U.C.T. (see addendum A for details of the programme). In this work a more overt confrontation between subjective viewpoints is explored and these interventions begin more lucidly to articulate the premise of attempting to activate the audience's subjective agency through an exposure on stage of what might otherwise be seen as threatening oppositional identities.

One of these skits revolves around two work colleagues accusing one another of racial insensitivity and of careless stereotyping. Throughout their argument they are interrupted by a host of characters in search of an office in their building. These characters are seen as completely one-dimensional stereotypes and as they exit the

two primary characters enjoy a few moments of mocking them together before returning to their arguments in defence of their own identities as unprejudiced. As each new stereotypical character enters the office the comedy shifts from satirical to burlesque, their dress, props that they carry, their physicalities and their speech exaggerate and push the framing of the action and the way in which these characters are viewed to the ridiculous- their behaviour and attitudes become so extreme that we can begin to see the latent untruths behind stereotypes and prejudice precisely because these falsehoods are pushed to their extremes. Finally the primary characters don clothes that illustrate stereotypical understandings of their own cultural identities completing the parody.

In these interventions the critique of racial and social stereotyping and thoughtless insensitivity works on several levels. It utilises and consequently exposes the audience's understandings or associations with the various character stereotypes, as well as the alacrity with which we rise to defend our own agendas whilst claiming tolerance for other, different cultures. In this way the work begins to excavate the layers of consciousness with which we operate and the multiplicities of meaning we construct as active agents of our subjective viewpoints.

In this way the content and stylistic choices of *Prisch Productions'* work create carefully constructed comic subjectivities for subversion on stage, presenting moments in which different subjective viewpoints are thrown into possible opposition. This sometimes painful or threatening process can be diffused through the medium of comedy by initiating the active subjective agency of the viewer, thereby creating an opportunity for an exploration and examination of difference without the impediment of experiencing these encounters as oppositional.



**Digitally manipulated image for University of Cape Town Postgraduate
Research Day presentation 2007:
Presenting and parodying the Prisch duo**

Conclusion

Because I know that time is always time
And place is always and only place
And what is actual is actual only for one time
And only for one place
I rejoice that things are as they are and
I renounce the blessed face

Because I cannot hope to turn again
Consequently I rejoice, having to construct something
Upon which to rejoice
(T.S. Elliot Ash Wednesday)

The comic opportunities inherent in subjective experiences are exciting. Their exploration allows for an observation of the ironies of our daily lives and creates a space for an exposure of the ridiculous. This self-reflexivity allows us to deconstruct our own lived experiences, to imagine others, and to begin to examine our world critically, and most importantly, without fear.

My intention through *Prisch Productions* is to create a recognisable format that will allow for an exhibition of thematic and aesthetic positions, subtly critiquing the 'norms' that society often unthinkingly accepts as the status quo. Using pastiche, montage, fragmentation and mixed media in its construction will allow for a rapid flow of seductive and colourful images that move beyond the binaries of conventional narrative. *Prisch Productions*' goal is to "expos[e] the ridiculous and grotesque in a manner that doesn't allow you to take the subject matter too seriously, thus allowing a cross reference while commenting on it too." (Kaplan: 36. 1988)

Sennet, cited in Ortner, asserts that we live in a time where "subjectivities (are) produced under the regime of flexibility" (Ortner: 13. 2005). Our digitised society allows us to make choices over virtually anything and everything, everyday. The opportunities to assimilate, assume, reject, reshape and become are endless; beyond even the scope of a plastic surgeon's tools. Beyond even the digital aliases created on

a computer screen where we may 'photoshop' ourselves to perfection or assume new, more glamorous interests and activities on our online profiles. Global consciousness has expanded and with it our opportunities to become whoever or whatever we want. We are able to modify notions of culture and shape our identities more than ever before. These lived experiences are not entirely at the mercy of capricious fortunes, but are in fact to a large extent, self-determined.

In a divergent and often fractured society in South Africa, the differences encountered can inspire opposition, hatred and fear of the other. As long as prejudices exist, so too must the necessity to counter them. I do not propose that a piece of theatre, a character or a stand-up skit will dissolve any and all intolerances in our society, but the opportunity to begin to shed light on the irrational fear of the other is empowering. The point is not that we should all be the same, or ever aspire to be, but that we can begin to understand different subjective viewpoints as equally valid and non-threatening. It is in this terrain that the framing of social experience and the revelation of constructed subjectivities take place; where the possibility for exploration of difference without opposition exists, a terrain whose exploration continues to interest and inspire my practical and academic research. It allows us to activate our subjective agency, to name differences and our fears around them and to put them in their place; this is an essential step towards South Africa becoming a more integrated society.

Addendum A:

Transformation at UCT

The Transformation Campaign is shaped by the following definition as reflected on the UCT website:

“UCT views transformation as a multifaceted and integrated process by which the university continuously renews itself in an ongoing effort to represent, in all aspects of its life and functions, the vision and ideals of its mission and values. Through its transformation agenda, the university strives to accomplish the following objectives:

- to redress past injustices
- to promote equal opportunity for all
- to reflect in the profile of its students and staff the demographics of South Africa
- to safeguard human rights
- to ensure that its system of governance, its teaching and learning, and its research and service uphold the inherent dignity of all, and meet the development needs of South Africa's emerging democracy.

Transformation, therefore, has to permeate the university and involve all members of the university community and underpin all activities. It is about responsiveness that is based on inward and outward reflection. Its essence includes responding to students and staff, positioning UCT internationally, and acknowledging the strengths and weaknesses of the university's legacy, as well as its current offering. Fundamentally, transformation at UCT must be about the teaching, learning and research environment and activities, requiring the university to broaden student access and to continually review its curriculum. This should be done not only for its national, continental and global relevance, but also in terms of the interface between its goal to be research-led and the challenges of an enriched teaching and learning environment. Transformation is thus considered as a performance management objective, providing UCT with the best possible chance of success.”

(Transformation Campaign at University of Cape Town:
<http://www.uct.ac.za/about/intro/transformation/>. Last Accessed May 2008.)

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