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## The Conundrums of Confessions: Johann Van Der Schijff's 'I to I'

Johann Van Der Schijff

By Mary Corrigan

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Have white male artists scrutinised their privilege or position through their art? Perhaps it has been more fashionable or even politically correct for them to map the lives of the so-called marginalised or those displaced by their privilege. Not so much as the means of deflecting their status but compensating for it. Has there been the space for them to claim their subjectivity from a critical position without

being paralysed by it? And indeed have shifts in society even truly brought white male artist to a point of crisis where they would need to address their status – given the lack of transformation in all spheres has been slow and within their control, to some degree?

There are also a whole heap of reasons in visual practice that could also account for the seeming absence of this discourse, such as the influence of documentary photography, which is rooted in voyeurism, conceptualism and now more recently the abstraction turn, which provides a hazy apolitical space to sidestep the politics of identity altogether.

Times could be a changing. Since long before an old estate agent ingloriously became the mascot of blinkered white racism. I am consciously overlooking a few people (like William Kentridge and Brett Murray who has made problematic efforts at introspection) as I would prefer to earmark Mikhael Subotzky's 2012 *Retininal Shift* show as the beginning of an introspective turn – which it has to be said is not consciously grounded in weighing privilege. He quite literally turned the lens on himself – his eyeballs – in an effort to embrace a kind of self-consciousness around his identity. Subotzky's exhibition included an expected filmic work, plotting the narratives of 'overlooked subjects' as per the documentary genre, but photos from his own 'archive' were also on display, functioning as a sort of counterpoint cancelling out or maybe justifying some of the baggage that went along with spying on homeless people masturbating.

Pieter Hugo, who has been criticised heavily for his 'othering' of black subjects, eventually took the plunge too, showing naked pics of himself in his 2013 exhibition *Kin*. Of course, with his tattoos he appeared more like his usual subjects rather than an outsider. It is not just photographers who are confronting themselves in their work, more recently in *E for Exhibition* at the Stevenson gallery last year Anton Kannemeyer dedicated a series to mapping his political awakening in *My Nelson Mandela: A short political history of a white South African in rotten English*.

Of course, white male privilege was not quite confronted in any of these examples and perhaps is difficult to do – how can it actually be done without slipping into an affirmation of that position?

Johann Van der Schijff's exhibition *I to I* at the Art On Paper gallery, deals with this conundrum. As the title suggests the show tackles a sort of face-off with the self. Being a visual artist he imagines this confrontation visually; as two beings eyeing each other from opposite positions – on either side of a confessional booth, at opposite ends of a bridge or in a game of chicken with two opponents in cars.

Interestingly, this discourse evolves via a collection of models for public sculptures where he completely overturns the design and function of them. He advances two radical alterations to public art; firstly, that monuments should never be conceived of as permanent from the get-go. To this end all of his public artworks have wheels attached to them so that not only can they be removed quickly, but, potentially, if they prove useful to society, can travel to different sites at different times where they can be accessed (or rejected) by different communities.

The second radical idea he advances through this show is that monuments should be functional in that they set the stage for public performances and can be used by the public rather than just operate as objects to gaze upon. For this reason he has designed a feet-washing podium and one based on a Roman Catholic confessional booth – there are two seats on either side of divide with a grill through which the two participants can communicate to each other without revealing their identity.

Both of these podiums are rendered in miniature and 1/3 scale, however, he would have liked them to be realised and sent the proposals to various public art committees and such. He felt that gestures of repentance shouldn't be done behind closed doors but should be publicly enacted, as in the manner of the TRC. The foot-washing podium was made in response to Adrian Vlok's eagerness to clean the feet of his victims or their relatives. Van der Schijff conceived of these podiums and the notion of temporary public sculptures in 2007 – long before the #rhodesmustfall campaign.

Van der Schijff's monuments appear to present an opportunity for South Africans to come to terms with the past individually while in a public setting, nevertheless, significantly, he appears unsure whether this can be achieved or have any impact.

Ultimately, though it might be more useful to view the other person – on the other side of the confessional grill, or the feet washer – not as another person, but another facet of the self that either refuses to humble themselves or beg for forgiveness or confess to their crimes. In this way the battle against racism and privilege isn't one that can necessarily be negotiated publicly, but internally, through self-reflection. A number of Van der Schijff's sculptures are centred around mirrors or have small mirrors embedded in them, such as the security cameras which instead of

Johann Van Der Schijff *Foot-Washing Podium*, 2015. Bronze, weather-resistant steel, mild steel, stainless steel, wood, enamel paint, 79cm wide x 115cm

high x 59cm deep encasing small cameras hold screens, which operate as subtle mirrors. In this way Van der Schijff forces the viewers to scrutinize their position within the public discourse around revelation and forgiveness.

Van der Schijff introduces himself into the dialogue, confessing to his 'position' in society. To this end he makes a tongue-in-cheek wooden sculpture of his everyday lunch; a Woolies sandwich and can of Bos. It is in the ordinary not the monumental events that his privilege is truly revealed. If you accept that it can be 'revealed' visually. Of course, there is no sense here that he has enjoyed unequal advantages; could he truly grasp them given they come so naturally? Yet he cannot 'speak' (make art) until he cops to his position in some way, just as Hugo or Subotzky 'reveal' themselves in order to further justify their work. This sense of being silenced is embodied in two soft sculptures, punching balls shaped as heads – the one character has a muzzle over its mouth, the other has no mouth.

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