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# Identity as Palimpsest

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Article

# Identity as Palimpsest

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**Abstract:** This article focuses on the formation of identity as a stratified discourse between the singular and the collective, and how that exchange is expressed as a visual palimpsest by the artists Annette Cords, G Farrell Kellum, and Njideka Akunyili Crosby. Through their artworks, each artist explores their own identity formation, but also identity formation of those living amid the Postmodern condition of the Western world in the late stages of capitalism. All three artists explore how the collective is manifested in their singular identities by weaving in the personal, intimate, and everyday vernacular into their artworks while also including remnants of wider cultural influences. In the contemporary moment, the dynamic process of identity formation remains betwixt any sort of settled or concretized state. This unresolved status is also reflected in the conceptualization and construction of the artworks by Cords, Kellum, and Akunyili Crosby. The messy interplay between the singular and collective is presented in their artworks as unexpected juxtapositions of diverse information, images, materials, and mark-making.

**Keywords:** identity; palimpsest; singular; collective; artwork



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## 1. Introduction

This article explores new articulations of identity in contemporary art practices. Its significance and importance within the research field is due to its demonstration of how various contemporary artists are responding to the evolving nature of identity formation in the contemporary moment which includes the influence of the Postmodern condition, late capitalism, and the Anthropocene. The main goal of the work is to argue for the conception of identity as a palimpsest which is represented in a variety of visual forms. Various theoretical writings are utilized to elucidate the relationship between the singular and collective in identity formation and how this exchange is evident in certain contemporary art practices.

The current state of the field includes important publications such as *Stepping Out!: Female Identities in Chinese Contemporary Art*, *Self-Made: Creating Our Identities from Da Vinci to the Kardashians*, *The Double: Identity and Difference in Art since 1900*, *This Is a Portrait If I Say So: Identity in American Art, 1912 to Today*, and *The Cindy Sherman Effect: Identity and Transformation in Contemporary Art*.

## 2. Results

Individual identities are complex and convoluted; they can also be messy and malleable while remaining continuously in flux. As Laura Miller has described of writer Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality, "every individual resides at the nexus of multiple identities, each affecting and shaping the others" (Miller 2018). A good visualization of all this complexity is the concept of the palimpsest. In the study of texts, the palimpsest is a page of writing which has had text erased or removed so that more text can be applied over top of the original. Through this process, traces of the original text are left slightly visible as ghostly remnants on the page. If we make a correlation of the palimpsest to identity, a palimpsest *as* identity, is then something which is built up through layering while retaining evidence of the earlier layers. In this article, I will be

focusing on the formation of identity as an unresolved discourse between the singular and the collective, and how that exchange is expressed as a visual palimpsest by the artists Annette Cords, G. Farrell Kellum, and Njideka Akunyili Crosby. Through their artworks, each artist explores their own identity formation, but also identity formation of those living amid the Postmodern condition of the Western world in the late stages of capitalism. This condition is also coupled with the 21st century ramifications of the massive changes being made to the planet in the era of the Anthropocene, which adds further complexity and anxiety to identity formation in the contemporary moment.

If we conceive of identity formation under these contemporary conditions as an exchange between the interior and exterior, or singular and collective, then we can also theorize this interaction as an ongoing dialogue. As a form of discourse, these exchanges can also be considered a form of communication. All three of the artists explored here create palimpsests to show how the collective is manifested in their singular identities by weaving in the personal, intimate, and everyday vernacular into their artworks as they are in communication with the remnants of wider cultural influences. In the contemporary moment, the fluctuating process of identity formation remains betwixt any sort of settled or concretized state. This unresolved status is also reflected in the conceptualization and construction of the artworks by Cords, Kellum, and Akunyili Crosby. The messy interplay between the singular and collective is presented in their artworks as unexpected juxtapositions of diverse information, images, materials, and mark-making.

### 2.1. *Singular and Collective*

To better elucidate the relationship of the singular to the collective in the cosmopolitanism of the 21st century, I have drawn upon a multitude of theories and writings. The first is by the philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy. Nancy deems the singular/collective relationship as an exchange that is a radical ontological status of being “singular plural”—both at the same time, never one without the other. Nancy posits that being itself depends upon a “being-in-common”, an understanding that inextricably locates the singular within the collective. The individual is given through the plural in which “this consciousness—or this communication—is ecstasy: which is to say consciousness is never *mine*, but to the contrary, I only have it in and through community (Nancy’s italics)” (Nancy 1991, p. 19).

Hannah Arendt expressed a similar connection between interiority and the exterior in her analysis of the Socratic inner dialogue. Even within the supposed solitude of the Socratic inner dialogue, Arendt emphasizes the presence of community in the turn toward interiority: “this faculty of thought, which is exercised in solitude, extends into the strictly political sphere, where I am always together with others” (Arendt 2005, p. 157). One crucial aspect of Arendt’s re-examination of the Socratic inner dialogue is how she circuitously navigates the critical connection between the singular subject and the plural (or the political as Arendt names it). Arendt, like Socrates, advocates for solitude as the situation in which the inner dialogue thought can best be realized. Any contact during the inner dialogue is considered unsettling and detrimental; “if somebody addresses me”, Arendt writes, “If somebody addresses me, I must now talk to him, and not to myself, and in talking to him, I change” (Arendt 2005, p. 98). Socratic estrangement, however, is given a clever hermeneutic twist by Arendt when she ponders that “the Socratic ‘being-one’ is not so unproblematic as it seems; I am not only just for others but for myself, and in the latter case, I clearly am not just one. A difference is inserted into my Oneness” (Arendt 2005, pp. 184–85). The Arendtian difference that is inserted into the subject is revealed as the presence of the polyphonic multiplicity of community. Through this revelation, Arendt emphasizes the interdependence of the singular and collective. She deftly pokes at the unity of the hermetic singular subject—the metaphysical “oneness”—into which Arendt inserts a difference. This same interdependence between subject and world emphasized by Arendt is later shown to be crucial in the analysis of the artworks by Cords, Kellum, and Akunyili Crosby.

To further demonstrate the concept of identity formation as dialogical interplay, I turn to Mikhail Bakhtin's concepts of "polyphony" and "heteroglossia". Just as Bakhtin believed that dialogical literature contained polyphony and heteroglossia, I argue that they are also present in the negotiation between the singular and collective. Polyphony means the existence of many voices, each with its own perspective. The theory of polyphony asserts that even within a single perspective, there are always multiple voices and viewpoints, because "language [and thoughts] are often borrowed from others". (Robinson 2011). Heteroglossia is like polyphony in the sense that it also describes a diversity of voices that may be present within a written or visual work of art. Bakhtin describes this occurrence as the "sideward glance" in which the emergent presence of other voices is considered and accounted for during the inner/outer dialogue. It means thinking of the other when forming a response, or as Bakhtin states, "no word [or gesture] is without its intense sideward glance at someone else's word" (Bakhtin 1984, p. 203). For Bakhtin, the recognition of the other arising from a dialogical exchange can have powerful effects on a subject because entire identities and worldviews are shaped by the experiences brought forth in their encounters. An intersectionality of voices is dynamically present in the heteroglossic network that surrounds each individual. In their own ways, Cords, Kellum, and Akunyili Crosby each create visual manifestations that show us the heteroglossic network in their explorations of identity.

Lastly, to further appreciate the imbroglia of exterior pressures on the interiority of the self, I lean upon the thoughts of Kwame Anthony Appiah. Appiah is also a proponent of thinking about identity as an undetermined discourse between the self and society. He asserts that "our individuality isn't produced in a vacuum; rather, the available social forms and, of course, our interactions with others help shape it" (Appiah 2006). Appiah is also careful to point out that the individual does have a certain degree of agency, and is often able to push back, subvert, or sidestep the characteristics encompassed in established social identities. As he claims, "identities come, first, with labels and ideas about why and to whom they should be applied. Second, your identity shapes your thoughts and how you should behave; and third, it affects the way other people treat you. Finally, all these dimensions of identity are contestable, always up for dispute" (Appiah 2018, p. 12). The dispute that Appiah references is the dialogue between the singular and collective, but more significantly, by framing the exchange as a dispute he emphasizes that these two may often be at odds with one another, the singular may resist the collective, and that their relationship or influence may evolve over time. This is similar to Judith Butler's critique of Foucault's sense of society scribing its influence on the body. In her discussion of subjectification, Butler candidly asks: "how can it be that the subject, taken to be the condition for and instrument of agency, is at the same time the effect of subordination, understood as the deprivation of agency?" (Butler 1997, p. 10). In her text, *Gender Trouble*, Butler criticizes Foucault's presumption of the body as a static *tabula rasa* awaiting cultural inscription. In a similar manner, I want to suggest that the individual negotiates and navigates an ontological space that relinquishes the predominance of any singular constituting force in the formation of identity.

The ability of the individual to negotiate or resist exterior constituting forces is supported by Appiah's assertion that individuals often invent new identities because the existing ones that are presented to them through cultural conduits are deemed insufficient or misaligned. The evolving exchange between the interior/exterior or the singular/collective enables the formation of new permutations of identity. As Appiah states, "Identities are so diverse and extensive because, in the modern world, people need an enormous array of tools in making a life. The range of options sufficient for each of us isn't enough for us all. Indeed, people are making up new identities all the time" (Appiah 2006). Through the process of making and re-making, dissolving, and erasure, individual identities emerge as unfolding interstitial zones of intersectionality. It is worth noting here that my use here of intersectionality goes beyond the original conception by Crenshaw and is closer in usage to "scholars and activists [which] have broadened intersectionality to engage a range of issues,

social identities, power dynamics, legal and political systems, and discursive structures” (Carbado et al. 2013). This broader sense of intersectionality has been utilized so that it mirrors the range of holistic forces acting on the formation of an individual identity, but also the evolving and unresolved nature of identity. This fragmented layering and unfinalized character of identity is perhaps best manifested through visual representation in the form of a palimpsest.

## 2.2. Identity as Palimpsest

The manifestations of heteroglossia, polyphony, intersectionality, and being singular/plural within identities does take the form of palimpsests in the artworks of Cords, Kellum, and Akunyili Crosby. These artists visualize the different influences on identity and how they are intertwined as woven, sculptural, collaged, and painted palimpsests. Through the processes of layering, concealing, and revealing of images, impressions, and text, each artist creates complex visual metaphors of identity. Not only do they explore the entangled and amorphous nature of identities in their artistic practices, but they also utilize diverse materials and construction methods to form palimpsests that examine the relationship between singular and collective identities. For instance, in G. Kellum’s *Lady Boom Bap* (Figure 1), he creates several collaged layers of magazine Pages from *Vibe*, acrylic paint, fabric, and marks made by a paint pen. The magazine pages are sliced and spliced to display fragments of body parts, microphones, and slivers of recognizable figure from hip-hop culture such as the rapper Eminem. These cultural references are overlaid with Kellum’s mark-making which serve as a record of his presence but also as an archive of his movements, gestures, and splashes. By building up a complex visual field, Kellum weaves together pieces of cultural influences with his own singularity—personal and intimate touches—which as a whole present a conversation between the singular and collective. The identities entwined in this artwork are multiple and varied, as they form a nexus of Kellum’s identity in visual form. The various identities represented here include hip hop, graffiti, fashion, architecture, street art, pop culture, being an urbanite, an artist, an academic, an African American, and a Philadelphian.



**Figure 1.** G. Kellum, *Lady Boom Bap*, Acrylic, collage, paint pen and fabric on wood.

Cords, Kellum, and Akunyili Crosby present their artworks as interstitial zones of colliding desires, histories, and identities formed through the layering and fracturing of different voices. The overlap of visual information is similar to the eclectic visual field that one can experience while moving through an urban environment. What is seen and what is not seen, or whose voices are present or absent, form a sort of politics of aesthetics because it is through visibility (or lack thereof) that different voices have a presence within identity formation. As Jacques Rancière has written, the significance of the visibility of a

voice should not be underestimated because “it is the delimitation of. . . the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise, that simultaneously determines the place and the stakes of politics as a form of experience” (Rancière 2006, p. 13). By seeing the layering of voices, actions, and histories that comprise identities as palimpsests, we can also realize that there are often alternative or forgotten histories and voices occurring just under the surface, often left behind as barely perceptible traces.

For example, Akunyili Crosby speaks of how everyday objects or people from the domestic vernacular creep into and occupy spaces within her paintings: “I wanted the pictures to fall back a little bit more than they did when I just cut them up and glued them on. I wanted it to exist first as a painting and then for the images to have a slight background effect to them” (Schneider et al. 2020, p. 38). Sometimes the presence of the objects or people are barely perceptible yet remain without disappearing. In her painting titled *Garden Thriving* (Figure 2), we can see a secondary layer of representation beyond the rendering of her Los Angeles based home that includes images of Nigerian food underneath the surface of the counter and images of Nigerian pop stars, models, celebrities, military dictators, as well as Akunyili Crosby’s personal snapshots intertwined within the vegetation. By doing so, Akunyili Crosby creates a hybrid of the personal and intimate with the larger cultural collective. She also emphasizes how each of these identities—Nigerian, Igbo, American, Californian, daughter, wife, immigrant, academic, and artist—remain entangled with each other in Akunyili Crosby’s existence. She attempts to make visible how our backgrounds and histories stay with us, perhaps as ghostly traces haunting our consciousness, but present nonetheless. The technique and media used (especially the photo-transfers which allow the artist to raise images from newspapers or magazines) also serve to reinforce the notion of the layered and bricolage palimpsest of her globalized and intersectional identity.



**Figure 2.** Njideka Akunyili Crosby, *Garden Thriving* (diptych), Acrylic, transfers, colored pencil, and collage on paper.

The dynamic process of identity formation, whether it be for people or places, remains perpetually in a state of evolution. This unresolved status is reflected in the conceptualization, construction, and palimpsest nature of the artworks of all three artists. For example, Cords displays some of her weavings so that the backside is visible. In doing so, Cords leaves the viewer to wonder why what is typically concealed has instead been revealed. For Cords, the artwork is not the front of the weaving or the back, but rather the evolving relationship between them which the viewer experiences in real time as they circle around the sculpture. In Akunyili Crosby’s collages, she layers the imagery in a way that some of the images are partially concealed, faded, or made semi-translucent. The process also creates layers within the reading and observation of the work which can provide a sense

of movement or oscillation between separate spaces and times—creating a sense of never being resolved.

The other means by which these artists present identity as a palimpsest is by bringing together distinctive references without dissolving them into a unified whole. Each of the voices, actions, and histories remain as identifiable fragments brought together as a bricolage. By creating a pastiche of the dialogue between the singular and collective, Cords, Kellum, and Akunyili Crosby also add another layer to the palimpsest of identity by pointing to the frictions, fissures, and hybrids which emerge from the singular/collective discourse. In Akunyili Crosby's *Tea Time in New Haven, Enugu*, for example, she includes objects and images which reference her life in America, her life in Nigeria, as well as the influence of English culture all brought together to form a hybridized palimpsest. We are shown that they each have a presence, but also given a sense of how they may overlap, recede, or conjoin each other through the dialogue of the singular/plural.

### 2.3. Cords, Kellum, and Akunyili Crosby

Annette Cords produces Jacquard loom weavings which fittingly “weave” together bits and pieces of visual data that she plucks from the massive visual field that she experiences walking through the urban streets on any given day. As we globally shift to an increasingly screen-based culture, the tsunami of visual stimulus only continues to grow. Cords' weavings represent a sort of visual literacy that attempts to make sense of this visual field and bring together disparate fragments in an intersectional and interstitial object of identity. Cords has referred to this interaction as “being receptive to what presents itself”.<sup>1</sup> By doing so, Cords also brings together a multitude of identities in her work that include artist, educator, German-American, immigrant, urbanite, sculptor, writer, weaver, as well as influences from material culture, pop culture, urban landscapes, writing systems, the vernacular, mark-making, painting, installations, and shifting human perception. Even though these visual fragments are held together through warp and weft, Cords also alludes to the unfinalized and ongoing dialogue between them by displaying some of her weavings so that the backside is visible (Figure 3). In doing so, Cords leaves the viewer to wonder why what is typically concealed has instead been revealed. For Cords, the artwork is not the front of the weaving or the back, but rather the evolving relationship between them which the viewer experiences in real time as they circle around the sculpture. In her recent weavings, Cords even more explicitly utilizes a palimpsest process in the production of these metaphorical identity objects. As Cords has specified, “In these recent tapestries, I take one weaving file, double back, and repeat parts of it. It is a form of erasure and revision during the process of creation. The effect is filmic and glitchy, revealing a search for articulation and form through the playful making of the tapestry itself”.<sup>2</sup>

G. Kellum's collages and sculptures display the complex web of polyphony which build upon one another to form the singular/collective matrix of identity. Kellum draws upon sources of hip-hop culture, graffiti tagging, and other ephemera from the urban landscape, woven together with his own distinct drips and gestural marks. Just as palimpsests preserve suggestions of what was once there, Kellum is also attentive to the presence of voices that are unseen or barely perceptible. As Kellum has stated, “I'm very much drawn to tags and hits as opposed to the more colorful and conceptually design forms of graffiti. To me these tags represent lost voices from the distant past as well as the present and voices not heard yet in the future”.<sup>3</sup> We can see an example of the incorporation of graffiti tags in his piece *The Dark Sygnus* (Figure 4). Kellum uses fragments or reinterpretations of the graffiti tags that he observes in the urban panorama to show how these tags maintain a latency and represent voices that serve as important exterior influences which are merged with singular identities much in the same manner as Bakhtin's heteroglossia.



**Figure 3.** Annette Cords, *Call On Me/Say It Softly*, (front)-left (back)-right, Handwoven Jacquard tapestry, cotton and wool.



**Figure 4.** G. Kellum, *The Dark Sygnus*, Acrylic, paint pen, and collage on wood.

Njideka Akunyili Crosby creates paintings of domestic interior spaces. Having been born and raised in Nigeria before moving to the United States, Akunyili Crosby depicts spaces chosen from the various places that she has called home. Within some of the objects in her paintings, Akunyili Crosby transfers and collages images of Nigerian cultural figures or particular objects with cultural resonance. Due to the transfer process, these images have a ghostly or shadowy presence. Akunyili Crosby's intent is to create a quilt-like palimpsest of the varied influences upon her own identity. As Andrea Lissoni writes, Akunyili Crosby shows "her own identity as it collides with familial, political, and cultural influences and traditions" (Schneider et al. 2020, p. 10). Even though these paintings are

often highly personal because they reveal intimate moments and reflect Akunyili Crosby's unique intersectionality of "Nigerian politics and Postcolonial history, social struggles, and popular culture", they also prompt the viewer to consider how "cultural entanglements and their feedback effects-intrude into the daily and intimate spheres of every individual with a lasting impact" (Schneider et al. 2020, p. 5).

#### 2.4. Shaping of Identities

These artworks are meant to challenge the viewer to consider both the liberation and erasure that occurs in the shaping of identities. In many ways these artists are continuing the investigations that the pioneering artist-as-activist Howardena Pindell began exploring in the early 1980s about the relationship between individual agency, political discourse, and the aspiration for freedom. There is especially a connection with Pindell's use of artistic expression in the search for answers. Just as Pindell once asked, "If a person is socially constructed as a gendered or raced subject, could that invented subject be deconstructed, reconstructed, or recontextualized as an aestheticized object?" Cords, Kellum, and Akunyili Crosby each question the relationship of the singular and collective and interior to exterior through their artistic practices (Beckwith et al. 2018, p. 98) by presenting incisive and purposefully open-ended questions in their works, which urge the viewer to sort through the implications of formulating any answers. The queries presented through in these art objects are intended to linger in one's consciousness—what is the role of language, cultural signifiers, and mark-making in the articulation of identity? How do voices become material, so they are not lost into the ether? How does the metaphysical become physical? How does the collective communicate with us and how do we respond? The objective of these artworks is not to supply a clear and concise answer—simply, because there isn't one. Instead, these artists have embraced, and brought to view, the complexity of the layering, fragmenting, concealing, and revealing that constitutes the mutability of any given singularity. Through the presentation of their consciously reflective woven and sculptural works, Cords, Kellum, and Akunyili Crosby remind us that identities are like patchworked palimpsests, beautifully muddled and knotty.

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#### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Annette Cords in discussion with the author, November 2021.
- <sup>2</sup> Annette Cords in discussion with the author, March 2023.
- <sup>3</sup> G Farrell Kellum, email message to author, November 2021.

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