

**Luis Jacob**  
**Towards a Theory...**  
by Henrjeta Mece

The 2010-11 Vtape Fellowship Essays  
3 essays produced in association with the  
Curatorial Incubator v.8:

**GOING SOLO:**  
**unescorted dreaming**

At Vtape, we're always looking for ways to celebrate video artists and the works they have created. When we awarded Allison Collins the Curatorial Incubator residency for 2010-11, we also selected 3 emerging curator/writers, Ananya Ohri, Henjreta Mece and Joshua Thorson, to receive this new Fellowship opportunity: support for their research and professional editing for their essay on the artist of their choice. The presence of these essays on-line marks an evolution in the functionality of the Vtape website as we make all the curatorial writing we commission and publish available not just to local visitors but to the international community of artists, curators, students and the public at large.

We extend our appreciation to the editors: Erik Martinson, artist and Vtape Submissions and Outreach Coordinator, worked with Ananya Ohri. Jean Paul Kelly, artist and Programming Director at Trinity Square Video, worked with Henrjeta Mece. Peggy Gale, independent curator and writer, worked with Joshua Thorson.



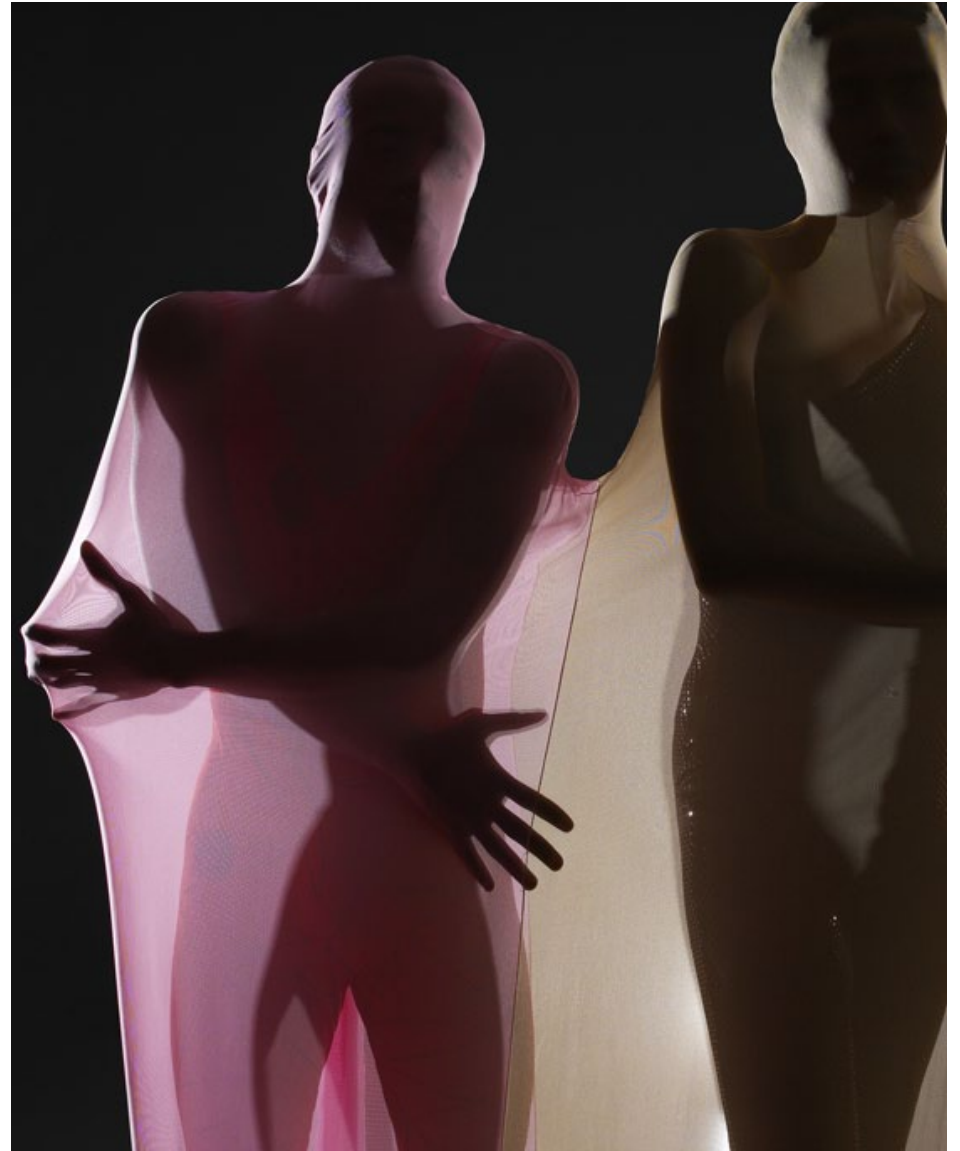
**Luis Jacob: Towards a Theory...**

by Henrjeta Mece

Shifting between the visual arts, sociological and philosophical realms, the work of many contemporary artists adheres to the notion of self as multiple rather than, a singular, progressively formed entity. According to Harvard psychologist Robert Kegan the nature of thought evolves across adult life, developing in three sequential stages: the traditional, modern, and postmodern.<sup>1</sup>

In a comparative turn, Kegan's model could be descriptively aligned with western art historical periods of romanticism (1790-1880), modernism (1900-1945), and postmodernism (1960-present, [present as vaguely defined]).<sup>2</sup> The diverse discourses associated with each of these western art historical periods does roughly approximate a lived lifespan, as such, and describes categories, or identities, "in-formation".

In the tripartite, "artist-practice-work," the artist is no longer a constant, singular identity. The works of Canadian artist Luis Jacob reflexively map this shift in practice, labour and identity.<sup>3</sup> It is difficult to pin down Jacob's work: each work shifts in a seemingly endless deferral of thought and meaning, only pausing to allow a new identity to arise. The



identities featured throughout Jacob's work are never distinct elements; instead it is the mass of selves in a perpetual state of formation that assumes focus - in its creation and interpretation. Although at first, the grouping of the artworks explored in this essay was intuitive, my reading of Jacob's work does resonate with Kegan's schema of cognitive development. The psychologist's three phases - the traditional, modern, and postmodern - situate our ongoing cognitive development in the hidden demands of modern life and the evolution of consciousness in adulthood.<sup>4</sup> My interest with these stages in relation to Jacob's artwork lies in the way these phases articulate the meaning hidden in that work - meaning that gradually shifts and articulates identity like the ever transforming body. While western art history framed the periods of romanticism, modernism, and postmodernism over a few centuries, in my metaphorical comparison with Kegan's schema, they are encapsulated into one lifespan. As the psychologist's model for the evolution of consciousness adapts the attributes of each art historical period, it establishes the ground in the artist's work for an identity always in formation, never fully completed.

The domain of Jacob's work is this "identity-in-formation": his work denies the power to completely define meaning and an artistic identity

as it crosses through various disciplines and mediums. This shifting materializes in multiple works, the video "Towards a Theory of Impressionist and Expressionist Spectatorship" (2002), the photographic series *The Viscous Ones* (2007) and his celebrated appropriated image projects, the *Album* series, in particular "Album VII" (2008). These networks are positioned in relation to questions of identity formation through the body and the social. As each of Jacob's works develops, they form internal networks with his previous works creating a matrix, scaffolding or guide for interpretation.

"Towards a Theory of Impressionist and Expressionist Spectatorship" is a two-channel, video that depicts three adolescents mimicking with their bodies the shapes of various Henry Moore sculptures at the Art Gallery of Ontario. There is no set narrative to the video; the diptych is rather an outcrop of an observed, playful, and spontaneous action at the museum. While the adolescents hold the poses of the abstract sculptures they create a comparative set of relations motivated by their own cognitive interpretations of the selected sculpture. This system of comparing and contrasting the self with others and objects is seen as a cross-categorical structure and reflective mode of knowing or meaning making.<sup>5</sup> As Kegan describes, during the traditional stage of cognitive development: "[t]he



adolescent realizes consciously that personal preferences are being subordinated to wider perspectives... [They derive] as part of a co-construction of the self out of the relationship between the categories of self and other".<sup>6</sup> The teenager's relation to the world can be examined from the "inside out"; inner categories formed within the self are applied to the outer world. During this stage, the adolescent realizes that there is a 'self' with interior reflections, motivations and subjectivities experienced through emotions; a psychological state recognized by romanticism. Emphasis on intuition and emotions over rationalism can be noted as tendencies of romanticism where judgment of values can be expressed in terms of concepts of feelings.<sup>7</sup>

In the museum, fully immersed in the expression of their bodily actions, the adolescents mimic Moore's sculptures. While rationally they attempt to follow the instructions provided by their instructor, in this case Jacob, their play is guided by the form of each object and their feelings towards it. As the adolescents observe and carefully select which sculpture to imitate, a process of categorization of objects through taste and preference takes place. At this stage the adolescent's mode of thinking is abstract, insightful, and constructed by the opinions they internalize from those who care for them, such

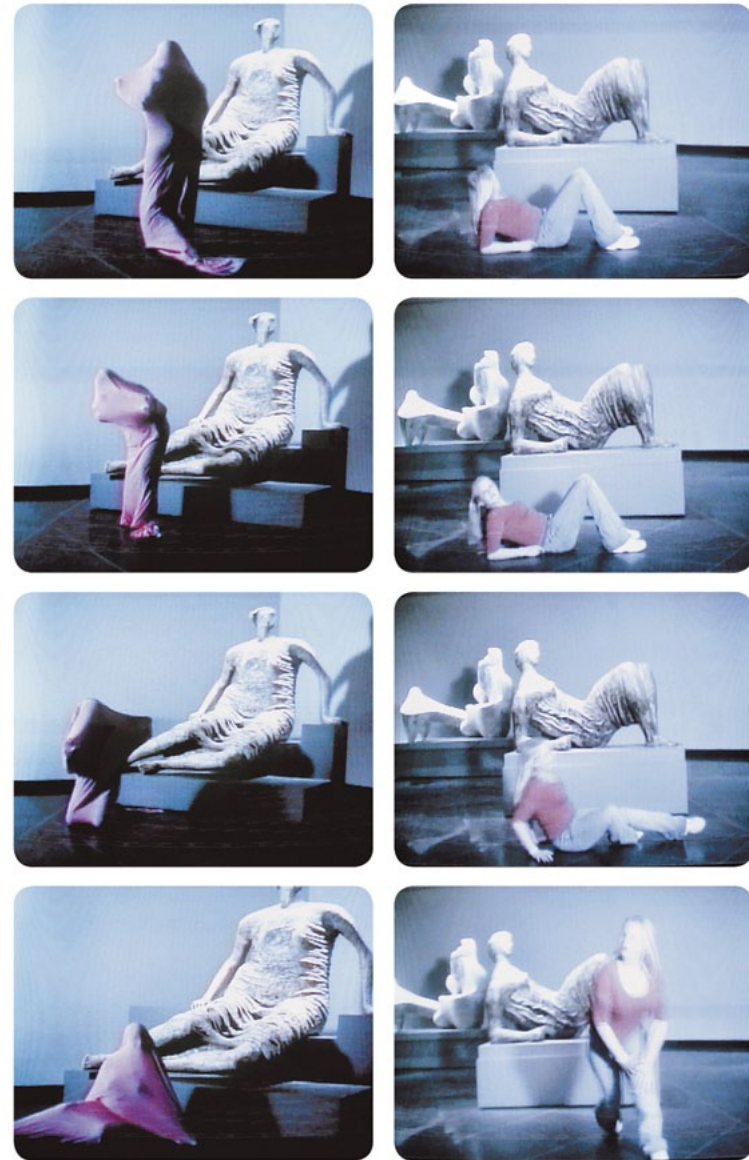


Luis Jacob - "Mottled Form"



as a parent or guardian. As they interpret the shape of the sculpture they compare their bodies with it as well as with the bodies of their peers. Throughout, this comparative process, they look for similarities and differences which will then assist them with the reorganization of their mental categories and formation of their independent mode of reasoning. The teens' faces are filled with wonder and curiosity as their own abstraction - the intentional irregular twists of their own shifting, changing bodies - comes face to face with meaning, or the lack thereof. As their bodily performances reconstruct Moore's sculptures, the teenagers "co-construct" the self through a co-relational experience with each other and their environment.

Continuing my sequential comparison, as Kegan's analysis of thought evolves from traditional to modern phase: Jacob's *The Viscous Ones* series too mimics this shift. Here, the adolescent's body is replaced by an adult's. This series of photographs depicts solitary figures concealed in Moore-like recline, clad in patterned, skin-like elastic fabrics. In some, the bodies appear beneath semi-transparent fabrics, in others, opaque ones. Unique forms and volumes are revealed through the graphic embellishment of key lights and severe shadows. For each figure, fabric patterns act as unusual camouflage. Instead of disguising these figures within their



environments, the colour-contrasted patterns expose them. Although fully exposed, these figures become mute having concealed their facial features; yet they remain entities. Here, the abstract modes of thinking of the adolescents in "Towards a Theory" are systematized into a systematic whole forming distinct personalities which can be examined from the "outside in".

The figures' distinct characteristics form an indefinite identity which cannot be categorized, producing autonomous beings authored by the body beneath. Self-authorship is a production of the modern stage: "...for the adult, the self is constituted by interacting selves of which it is the administrator, and it is the author of its interior psychological realities...the self realizes that experiences do not define but belong to each self and other, and so can be related to, subordinated, and regulated, rather than constituting each self and other"<sup>8</sup>

Hence, these individuals are the authors of selves which they write and re-write. Echoing Kegan's modern stage, a prominent characteristic of the art historical period of modernism is self-consciousness. The later was seen as a progressive way of thinking that affirms to human beings the power to recreate and reshape their selves and their environments.<sup>9</sup> Aspirations for autonomy and authenticity stand at the heart of this period.



These photographs impose on us a viewing of the body in ways in which we tend to overlook the historical traditions encompassed within Western thought. As the figures within the photographs languish in their distinct individuality they deconstruct assumptions about the body, rejecting the restrictions of social and political systems that allow us to structure our own identities and to form our roots with a particular community.

As Homi Bhabha acknowledges, "The inability to permanently locate one's self as part of a specific cultural narrative seems to be a prominent condition in contemporary culture."<sup>10</sup> As we note in both local and global communities, as well as in personal and collective histories, there is resistance in articulating that which cannot be located or categorized. Perhaps it is the struggle - and pleasure - in reading the indefinite identity these solitary figures project that captivates the viewer's attention.

The self-authored identity of the modern stage multiplies in Jacob's "Album VII" - forming a multitude of selves. This album is composed of a series of 84 letter-size, laminated panels, each containing a number of appropriated, photographically-based images. As the title implies, this piece is a collection of images.

Thus unlike a family album, there are no documentations of Jacob's personal life or artwork in "Album VII".<sup>11</sup> These images are

cut out of magazines purchased at second-hand stores, found, or handed to the artist, therefore they are appropriated from other authors - some recognizable, some not. At first, the appropriation of the images might render them banal; but, these 'banal' images reveal themselves to be much more complex as the artist collects, groups, arranges and mythologizes them.

This album places an emphasis on the body and its vulnerability as well as the social pressures throughout various historical periods. The bodies in this album arise from a common struggle with conventions and come together grouped in panels during intense moments of irrational and unpredictable behaviour. In an implicit way "Album VII" projects how the body functions beyond colonial history and disciplinary logic, gender construction, the post-human and alternative democracies. Despite the existing structures of power these bodies transgress conventional forms. Whether social or political, the body here becomes a complex terrain for meaning, ambivalence and contradiction.

There are images in this album I recognize. There are representations of things in it I have personally seen. Nonetheless, as much as I am inclined to begin a detailed interpretation with the anatomical wax figures from La Specola Museum in Florence or Joseph Beuys's "I Like America



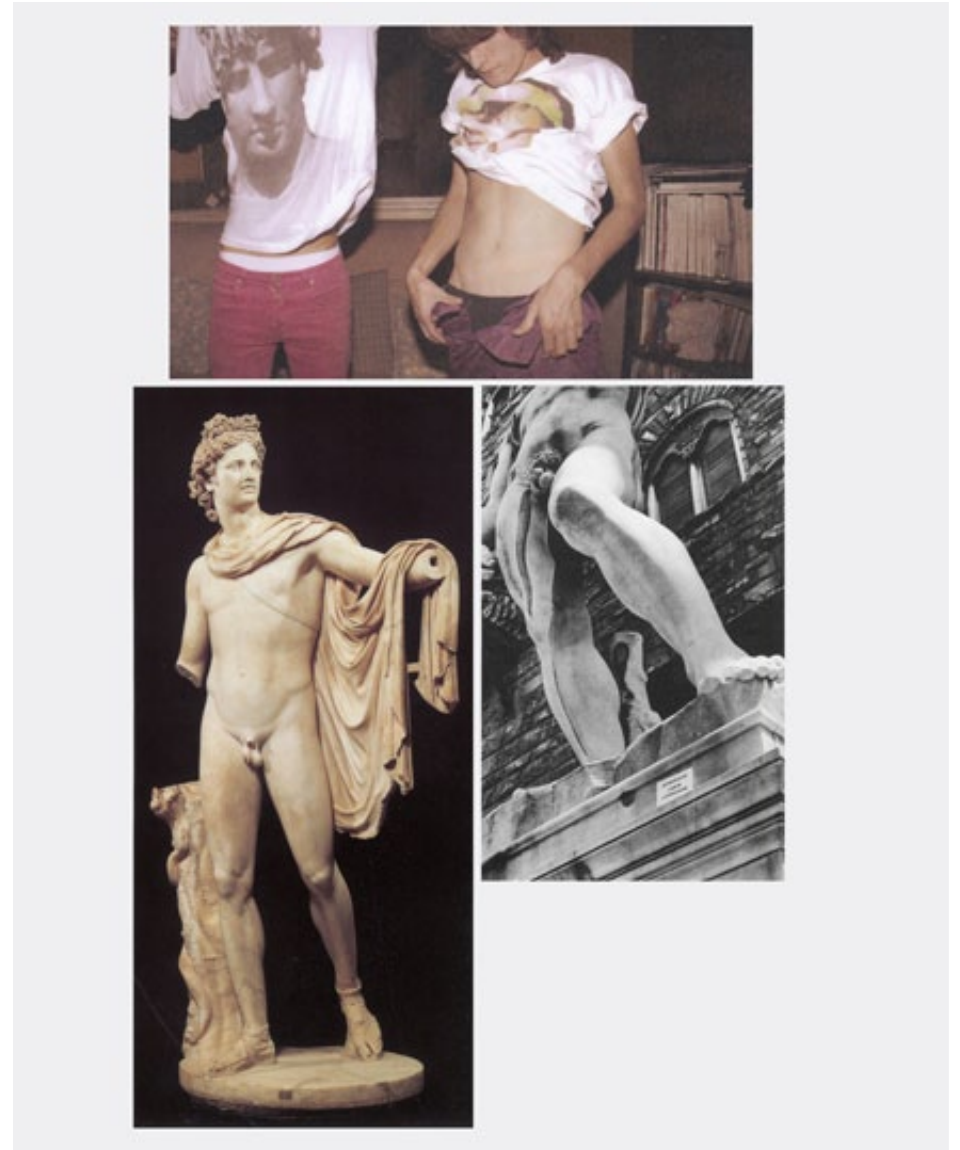
and America Likes Me", and conclude with Yves Klein's photograph "Into the Void", I shall not.

Why take the route of conscious meaning making between images when the album offers the freedom of endless wanderings? If there is a beginning and end in "Album VII", it can be defined only at a personal level. Each time I see the album new meanings arise. This multiplicity can be aligned with Kegan's postmodern stage. Here, the thought process is organized by trans-systems, or cross theories: "[trans-systems] inherently contain paradox, contradiction, oppositeness of conflict...

Plans, even collectively created ones, live in incompleteness, and should be continually nourished by contradictions so that they can live growth and ongoing reconstruction."<sup>12</sup>

Herein, the process of "Album VII" takes precedence, bringing forth maps of the artist's thoughts and signs of a constantly morphing narrative. "Album VII" abolishes the hierarchies of the representative order; there is an immense sense of freedom from knowledge when looking at it. If there is a narrative, it is different for each viewer. The set of relations between what is seen and what can be said about the album is individual. Even the direction in which the album is viewed is open to interpretation.

Viewing can take place from right to left or left to right just as in the spiralling ramps of the rotunda at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. But, the variety of viewing and the





possibilities of meaning-making in the work create unease. Precisely what multiplicity does. As Kegan writes: "the recognition of our multiple selves [stands] for the capacity to see conflict as a signal of our overidentification with a single system, for the sense of our relationships and connections as prior to and constructive of the individual self, for an identification with the transformative process of our being rather than the formative products of our becoming..."<sup>13</sup> For these reasons, I am altogether facilitating the avoidance of a totalizing meta-narrative in "Album VII". In similar ways, conceived to be a realm of discontinuous allegories, postmodernism in art history abandoned the grand narrative of modernism. For, as we all know, there is more than one story.

By investigating the labyrinths of the social world, Luis Jacob explores those of the self; just as Kegan explored human life through changing psychological stages. For now, for us, the last psychological stage is the postmodern one. However as society evolves and science continues to extend the human lifespan, perhaps new stages will be added in the future cognitive schemas, leading to other forms of thought and of art. After all, "Life is a whim of several billion cells to be you for a while."<sup>14</sup> – it has been said. □

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#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Robert Kegan, In Over our heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994).

<sup>2</sup> Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, Art in Theory 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> Luis Jacob, Unpublished recordings, Nov 6, 2010.

<sup>4</sup> Gerald Young, Adult Development, Therapy, and Culture: A Postmodern Synthesis. (New York and London: Plenum Press, 1997) 21.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. 50.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 51.

<sup>7</sup> Chales Baudelaire and David Kelley, Salon de 1846. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975).

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. 51

<sup>9</sup> Helen Gardner, Horst De la Croix, Richard G. Tansey, and Diane Kirkpatrick, Gardner's Art Through the Ages. (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1991) 953.

<sup>10</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, The Location of Culture. (Routledge London and New York, 1994) 1.

<sup>11</sup> Luis Jacob, Unpublished recordings, Nov 6, 2010.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. 55-56

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. 351

<sup>14</sup> Unknown author.



## CONTRIBUTOR BIOS

**Luis Jacob** is an artist, curator, and writer based in Toronto, Canada. His diverse practice addresses issues of social interaction and the subjectivity of aesthetic experience. Jacob's work has been exhibited in solo exhibitions at Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art (Toronto), Art in General (New York), Fonderie Darling Foundry (Montréal), Städtisches Museum Abteiberg (Mönchengladbach), amongst many other international and Canadian galleries and museums. His work has been featured in Haunted: Contemporary Photography / Video / Performance, Guggenheim Museum (New York)/Guggenheim Museum Bilbao (Spain), Animism, Kunsthalle Bern (Switzerland)/Extra City Kunsthall Antwerpen (Belgium), Dance with Camera, Contemporary Art Museum (Houston)/Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania (Philadelphia) and as part of documenta12 (Kassel).

**Henrjeta Mece** is a multidisciplinary artist, writer and curator based in Toronto, Canada. Her research and creative practice in contemporary art discourse, history and geography explore issues related to the body, space, place and belonging. She completed her BFA at OCAD University (Toronto) and later her, MFA. She is the recipient of numerous awards including, Canada Millennium Excellence Award and has participated in several national and international residencies including, The Banff Centre for the Arts. Her artwork and curatorial projects have been exhibited throughout Europe and North America. At present, Mece is working on her solo exhibition for Redhead Gallery as well as, curating an exhibition for A Space and Toronto Free Gallery.

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