

Anke Kempkes
The Changing Man

‘I am a fisherman of social absurdity, if you will.... My focus is to politicise disenfranchisement... to reinvent what’s beneath us, to remind us where we all come from.’

—William Pope.L¹

Tomasz Machciński began to use colour photography in 2006. Many of the poses and characters he performs for the camera onto colour film are continuations from his decades of black-and-white self-portrait photography—a genre which he adopted in 1966, and which remains the focus of his prolifically persistent artistic practice. While the postwar black-and-white photography of Machciński’s *Album* plays with a degree of theatrical illusion, even suggesting affinities with the world of cinema, the contemporary photographs present a considerably different atmosphere to the viewer.

When colour is introduced into the photographic process, a ‘reality effect’ enters the frame, enhancing the materiality of the artist’s persona, which is never successfully disguised by the masquerade, the masquerade deliberately denying an image of perfect illusion or completed metamorphosis. By his own account, Machciński is consciously exhibiting traces of ageing and other effects of physical change as he has advanced through life: ‘I don’t use hairpieces or other tricks. Instead, I use everything that happens to my body, such as: regrowth of hair, loss of teeth, illnesses, ageing, etc.’² As part of the same operation, the colour photography reveals the jury-rigged shabbiness (‘poorness’) of Machciński’s outfits, props, and makeup.

But one should not be mistaken. We are never quite getting the ‘real’ Tomasz Machciński. Rather, his practice is a continuously evolving *social sculpture*; an obsessive drive toward ceaseless incarnation aimed at an aesthetic continuum that does not distinguish between the moment of artistic creation and that of mundane social activity. In the last scene of a recent film documentary, Machciński restlessly—and almost compulsorily—dresses, undresses, and re-dresses in front of his camera, as if it is only through such chameleonic transformations that he can live and breathe. His performance makes clear that, for Machciński, to represent an authentic identity can never be achieved, or lived, or faced, accepted, and endured.

¹ *William Pope.L: The Friendliest Black Artist in America*, ed. Mark H.C. Bessire (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), 23.

² Tomasz Machciński, quoted in Anke Kempkes, ‘The Unattainable,’ in Tomasz Machciński, *Album* (Warsaw: Tomasz Machciński Foundation, 2020), 44.

Much of this social theatre, with its permeable dimension of historicity in which the only constant is the artist's metamorphic presence, brings to mind *Zelig* (1983), Woody Allen's masterpiece mockumentary. At a time when kaleidoscopic postmodern subjectivity made its entrance into popular culture, Allen's whimsical hero, Leonard 'The Lizard' Zelig, appears on screen as a character with a mysterious condition: he compulsively changes his appearance, assuming the ethnicities and physical characteristics of those in close proximity to him. Zelig is a 'human chameleon,' who yearns to fit in because, as he reveals under hypnosis: 'It's safe to be like the others.' Over the course of the movie, he transforms into a Native American, an African American, a Chinese man. When he undertakes psychotherapy with a dedicated psychiatrist, Dr. Eudora Fletcher (played by Mia Farrow), Zelig, oblivious to his assigned status as a patient, believes *himself* to be a psychiatrist—and one who worked with none other than Sigmund Freud in Vienna.

The film shifts between ersatz black-and-white 'archival' footage and contemporary colour segments featuring interviews with both fictional and real-life personages, the latter including Saul Bellow, Susan Sontag, and Bruno Bettelheim. Allen's script also delivers its own interpretation: Zelig, like Allen, struggles with his American Jewish identity; his compulsive transformations are described within the context of assimilation. Zelig eventually becomes a sensation, a celebrity. His life story is turned into a Hollywood film entitled *The Changing Man*.

Although Zelig's and Machciński's transmutations are linked by their social theatricality, the character of Zelig is oblivious to, and rejective of, any differences between his actual personality and those of the individuals, real and imagined, that he mimics. His desire to blend in is absolute. Tomasz Machciński, on the other hand, acts with the acute awareness that not only are his transformations performative in nature, but they are an unremitting experiment to reach for the 'unattainable': 'Everything I dream about, I have photographed. These are photographs of my dreams, my desires, my goals, as the unattainable.'³

Like Zelig, Machciński is driven by desire, but his is not a timid longing to conform. Rather, Machciński practices his phantasmic self-inventions in the face of, and as a reflection of, society's normative typologies. One could compare this moment—when phantasmic longing is configured in the normative, the known, the popular or mundane image—to the Brechtian V-effect: a distancing effect for keeping the awareness of the viewer activated about the political potential of performativity in relation to the represented. In Machciński's case, his embodied personas are never fully what they seem to represent: there is an estrangement between the materiality and historicity of his body and the permanence of the social (arche)types and fictitious characters he impersonates.

³ Tomasz Machciński, quoted in *ibid.*, 37.

In Machciński's initial body of black-and-white photographs, dating from the 1960s–1980s, his impersonations are still rooted in the culture of the communist-era Polish People's Republic (PRL), from propagandistic stereotypes to bohemian and popular characters. His work was thus unfolding with accountable tension tied to the society that surrounded him. In his contemporary colour photography, however, Machciński's characters appear increasingly detached from historic contingency. These performances register now as a rather unbound, individualistic practice. As artist Mikołaj Sobczak describes it:

I see Tomasz Machciński as I see the Palace of Culture in modern Warsaw. A single spectacular monument, an individualist, highly celebrated by our recent neoliberal system, but decorated with the ideas of communism: 'People of all nations, unite!' One can find there sculptures of Asians, Africans, Europeans, Muses, Scientists, Workers, Writers... Exactly like in Machciński's oeuvre, which is the perfect symbiosis of the history of the Iron Curtain. The key element is here the transformation from socialism to liberalism. He seems to say: 'People of all nations, unite. But in me!'⁴

The Blackface Problem: Machciński's 'Colourism'

Striking moments occur in Machciński's colour photographs when the artist poses as various ethnicities—not only through outfits and accessories, but through Machciński literally colouring his skin, a hyperbolic and politically contested signifier of racial identity.

The feature of the painted face first appears in the earlier black-and-white photographs. It is assigned to a range of Slavic and 'Oriental,' i.e. Orientalist, characters; to an outrageously stereotyped Native American; to a Che Guevara-type, Latin American political revolutionary.

However, of equal significance to these racialised parodies and satires, are the motifs in which Machciński evokes subaltern personas on the margins of society: a downtrodden beggar living on the streets, say, or a lout with a glowering face straight out of Fritz Lang's 1931 thriller *M*. Set against a dark background, the sense of fatalism or menace these characters emanate is dramatically enhanced, becoming palpable. The sooty, grime-smearred faces evoke expressions of depravity, vice, and even derangement. The *mise-en-scène* is both borrowed from popular culture and its stereotyping and subtly interwoven with the artist's own narrative.

Born in 1942, Machciński was left orphaned in the ruins of war-torn Poland. Suffering from spinal tuberculosis and a hearing impairment, Machciński was

⁴ Mikołaj Sobczak, quoted in *ibid.*, 44.

hospitalised from a tender age. As a teenager, he was institutionalised for years as a 'disabled' person. After this period, in the mid-1960s, he found himself homeless. He then moved into a shared room at a railway station. He had applied to the State Higher School of Fine Arts in Poznań but was rejected, after which he began working as a machinist manufacturing office equipment.

The early photo performances described above suggest a thread that runs through the artist's oeuvre. Following the perpetual evolution of Machciński's characters, we see varying gradations of dark pigment on their faces. Sometimes this feature indicates ethnicity and sometimes social class and status; sometimes ethnicity and class are epitomised in the same figure. The application of the coloured makeup is imperfectly executed with deliberate clumsiness, revealing, firstly, the problematic and fragile status of 'colourism' in the representation of ethnicity (Frantz Fanon); and, secondly, the degrading association of poverty with ugliness and a propensity for violence.

As if in communion with the postwar performances of Miron Białoszewski and Jack Smith, Machciński adopts a makeshift aesthetic when it comes to his attire and props, gleaning accoutrements from thrift stores, flea markets, and heaps of kerbside debris. He scavenges the detritus of society, not only to create his (sub)cultural incarnations, but also to experiment provocatively with allegorical recreations of his persona as a piece of 'human wreckage': the artistic counter-appropriation of subaltern subjectivity, giving agency to those left behind and pushed to the margins of society (the inanimate included), while tirelessly performing to become its exemplary medium.

I would argue that Machciński's conspicuous use of 'coloured' faces is a practice that expresses his sociopolitical alignment with, and deep, running empathy for, the subaltern position in society; and one which allows him to register his counter-appropriative contestation of the embodied signifiers assigned to the subaltern by society. In this sense, he is not specifically representing ethnicity, but subversively appropriating the power mechanism of colonial representation, as well as of social discrimination, both featuring on the same level in his photographs and blending into each other, comparable in degrees to the way African-American performance artist William Pope.L described his practice: 'I am a fisherman of social absurdity, if you will.... My focus is to politicise disenfranchisement... to reinvent what's beneath us.'

It is precisely this grotesque theatre of racist typologies that is floodlit by the powerful performance of the American actor, singer, rapper, stand-up comedian, and director Donald Glover, aka Childish Gambino, in the Grammy-winning music video for his song 'This Is America' (2018). In a potent and multilayered performance that is equal parts physically and intellectually unrelenting, Glover addresses gun violence and the aftereffects of historically prevalent systemic racism and discrimination in the United States.

Less than a minute into the video, Glover's character shoots a man in a prisoner's hood through the back of the head while striking a pose in which Glover mimics the body language of 'Jim Crow,' a nineteenth-century character based on a racist depiction of a Black American as a folk trickster dressed in rags and tattered shoes. Developed by Thomas D. Rice, an American stage entertainer, the persona was a staple of minstrel shows—a form of racist burlesque in which predominately white performers appeared in blackface to act out heinous caricatures—where it was used to spread a disparaging view of the character, intelligence, and work ethic of Black Americans, typecasting them as 'lazy, dim-witted, buffoonish, superstitious, and unworthy of integration.'

Each scene in the video for 'This Is America' is a devastating dramatisation and indictment of the racist stereotyping Black Americans continue to be subjected to by a White-dominated culture. Glover moves disruptively from one impersonation to the next, 'his manic elation erupting into violence at a speed that matches something of the media consumer's daily experience.'⁵ In the video's closing scene, a sprinting Glover is being pursued by White characters between the columns of a parking garage. As he is enveloped by darkness, only his eyes widened in terror remain visible.

One of the most challenging incarnations in Machciński's body of colour photographs appears when he poses in blackface as a woman wearing a wildly patterned dress with pink and brown plants and flowers and a hat with a vaguely 'African' design adorned with exotic feathers. In his photographs, Machciński only approximates what he seems to represent, marking his characters clearly as his own phantasmic creations. In his performance as a 'Black woman'—her facial expression belonging to the historically passed down repertoire of primitivism—the artist appears to appropriate the racist stereotype of a Black person as a 'savage.' In another image, Machciński wears a blue shirt and an Abraham Lincoln top hat emblazoned with a representation of the American Stars and Stripes. His face and chest are darkened. On his ear, a feminising attribute in the form of an earring resembling a dreamcatcher dangles. His face is stubbly. This representation carries numerous ambiguities and instabilities regarding the figure's social, national, ethnic, and gender identities.

While one could condemn such representations as instances of the artist exploiting racialist social stereotypes for purposes of artistic 'entertainment,' I would contend that Machciński's semiotic aesthetic, while certainly making use of derogatory signifiers, follows the path of a critical counter-appropriation in which his crass

⁵ Doreen St. Félix, 'The Carnage and Chaos of Childish Gambino's "This Is America,"' *The New Yorker*, 7 May, 2018, [newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/the-carnage-and-chaos-of-childish-gambinos-this-is-america](https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/the-carnage-and-chaos-of-childish-gambinos-this-is-america) [accessed 22 April, 2020].

impersonations (crass, at least, at the superficial level) in fact channel a disruptive force.

In his groundbreaking book *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), the West Indian psychiatrist, political philosopher, and activist Frantz Fanon, analysed the psychopathology of colonialism. Fanon postulated that the Black individual is a *phobogenic* (phobia-causing) object, triggering anxiety and fear in White subjects. Fanon breaks down the exploitation of chromatic differences—the most conspicuous outward indication of race—throughout colonial history: specifically, the use of skin tone as the sole criterion by which human beings were judged by the coloniser, and how the resulting judgements were used to legitimate the domination of the coloniser—whose very Whiteness was worn as an emblem of ‘Justice, Truth, Virginity’—over the colonised, whose ‘deviant’ pigmentation equated to ‘ugliness, sin, darkness, immorality.’⁶ Fanon stated that the effect of this colour-coded racism is the ‘epidermalization’ of inferiority.⁷

Machciński’s disruptive depictions of characters for which he applies colour to his face—most pronounced in his characters wearing dark or black makeup—re-enact Fanon’s concept of the phobogenic through the medium of his performative photography. Such image strategies—playing with and challenging the cultural phobias of the viewer, while simultaneously striving for the emancipation of his emphatic impersonations from phobic readings—are implemented by Machciński throughout his photographic Atlas, exposing equally his mutated and ageing body and, in a related constellation, his sexuality.

Politics of Pigmentation

As the transgender theorist Paul B. Preciado has analysed, in a parallel narrative unfolding, in the 1980s, on the other side of the Iron Curtain from Machciński, the German-Chilean artist Lorenza Böttner channeled historico-political contexts into a self-fictionalising work of art in which the body and the self-portrait of the artist become sites of dissident aesthetic investment. Böttner put her own modified body and transgender identified persona in the centre of her artistic investigations, where the plurality of her positions concerned not only sex and gender, but also history and time. According to Preciado, ‘Lorenza was interested in the simultaneity of embodiments and not identity as a static place.’⁸ Preciado describes Böttner’s

⁶ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. from the French by Charles Lam Markmann (London: Pluto Press, 2008), 49, 139.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁸ Paul B. Preciado, curator’s text, n.p., exhibition booklet for *Lorenza Böttner: Requiem for the Norm*, curated by Paul B. Preciado, Württembergischer Kunstverein, Stuttgart, 23 February–28 July, 2019.

photographic, painted, or drawn incarnations as a ‘Museum of Desire and Melancholy’: ‘She portrayed the lives of the late 20th-century politico-sexual lumpen in the cities to which she travelled. Her paintings introduce a gallery of socially subaltern characters with whom the artist established an alliance [...]: Amsterdam prostitutes, African Americans as the object of police violence in New York, lesbian sexuality under the shadow of the male gaze, and gay sexuality.’⁹

Böttner created a series of nude photographs, titled *Face Art* (1983), using her skin as a canvas by applying dark pigment and frontally showing her upper body in a way that exposed her arm amputations. ‘The face,’ writes Preciado, ‘is dehumanised, animalised or transfigured by lines reminiscent of tribal markings. Pigments were not the only substance that Lorenza painted with: she used head hair and body hair—beard, eyebrows—as formal and chromatic motifs to construct a face that was not one.’ Preciado also writes that, ‘By turning [her face] into a surface of inscription, Lorenza denaturalised the face as the site of identity—of gender, race, humanity—and asserted it as a socially constructed mask.’¹⁰

In contrast to Böttner’s postmodern, politically situated practice, Machciński—an artist whose formative years date back to the postwar era—remains invested in an ongoing project based on the idea of an ‘individualist universality.’¹¹ His claim is that history itself materialises in his body as a permanent site of performance. In this programme of historical transvestism, Machciński’s body, his hair and skin, transform like our histories. And in his colour photography, he integrates and exposes every aspect of this process to a heightened visual significance.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Mikolaj Sobczak, quoted in Anke Kempkes, op. cit., 45.