Imaging Ourselves:

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In the course of the twentieth century, visual experience became central to everyday life. Increasingly, visual media like film, television, billboard advertisements, glossy magazines, are our preferred modes of communication, displacing the written word so completely that academics constantly bemoan the fact that their students no longer read and that they are, therefore, often seriously under-educated. The emerging dominance of the visual is nevertheless cause for celebration, affording as it does opportunities for promoting and acquiring forms of literacy that are, unfortunately, sorely under-valued and under-developed in the African academy. As [Irit] Rogoff notes in her essay, 'Studying Visual Culture', today vision and the visual world are central to the production of meaning, 'establishing and maintaining aesthetic values, gender stereotypes and power relations within culture.' As such visual culture opens up an entire world of intertextuality in which images, sounds and spatial delineations are read on to and through one another, lending ever-accruing layers of meanings and of subjective responses to each encounter we might have with film, TV, advertising, art works, buildings or urban environments.

Nicholas Mirzoeff (1998:4); Irit Rogoff in Mirzoeff (1998:14-15)

THIS PUBLICATION is a compilation of extended versions of the papers which were presented at a one-day national conference, titled *Imaging Ourselves: Visual Identities in Representation*, held at the University of Johannesburg's (UJ) School of Tourism and Hospitality on Friday 15 June 2009. The UJ's Faculty of Art, Design and Architecture's Research Centre (RC), *Visual Identities in Art and Design* (VIAD), convened the conference.

Since 1994, attempts to celebrate South Africa's transformation from minority to majority rule have given rise to multiple constructions of 'post-apartheid identities'. Taking its cue from the relevance of transforming and constantly evolving conceptions of South African identities (individual and collective) in our post-1994 democracy, the thematic of the conference attempts to identify and address ways in which these identities might be articulated and realised through visual representation.

Unlike the Enlightenment view of identity as a stable, fixed and unchanging essentialist reading of the self, constructivist discourses in the humanities and social sciences have shown how, within post-modern and post-colonial contexts, identity might more applicably be described as unfixed, fluid, in process and/or discursive. Within the broader global arena of art and design, artifacts are frequently viewed as 'commodities' through which various identity options (cultural, political and social) are taken up (Kellner 1995:232-233). As the opening quotes indicate, Douglas Kellner (1995), Nicholas Mirzoeff (1998) and Stuart Hall (1994), among many other cultural theorists, point out how identity is increasingly being communicated through modes of representation (language) or signs.

This correlates with the core thematic of VIAD, which explores these negotiated, performed, re-conceptualised and/or re-imagined visual

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identities from a primarily Pan-African, post-colonial perspective, whilst considering these as part of a broader post-modern paradigm. Within the thematics of the RC, conception of visual identities might be aligned with Hall's (cited in Ang 1999:554) theorisation of identity as "a form of representation which is able to constitute us as new kinds of subjects, and thereby enable us to discover places from which to speak". The politics of self-representation as Hall sees it, reside not in the establishment of a fully-fledged, stable and definitive identity in the modernist sense, but in its use as a strategy to open up avenues for new speaking trajectories and the articulation of new lines of theorising.

The papers in this publication seek to add to Halls' 'new line of theorising' by examining various modes of visual production (specifically art and design practices) in terms of how these contribute to the production of meaning in South African culture. A notable characteristic of the collection is the diversity of approaches adopted to questions of how we, as post-apartheid South African artists and designers, might begin to 'image ourselves. This diversity spans across disciplines and forms of representation. Recurring themes in this compilation include advertising and the role of the media in the construction of individual, social and national identities; the intersecting areas of cultural, historical, social and ideological identities, including constructions of gender and race; an interrogation of the politics of representation in relation to race, gender and ethnicity; identities as articulated through proposed relationships offered by the South African built environment and landscape; marginalised individual and collective identities as 'performed' through the text and identities expressed through modes of representation, such as digital artist's books, with particular emphasis on South African modes of production.

In compiling this collection of papers, my intention is to highlight the central role that art and design p lays in the formation and expression of post-1994 South African visual identities and, in so doing, to contribute to the broader redefinition of South Africa's social and cultural identities, which is still ongoing on multiple levels.

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