

I MARRIED A PUPPET

DIETER MERSCH



FIG. 1
ELENA DORFMAN. *THE ORIGIN OF THE NEW
WORLD*. PHOTOGRAPHS, SERIES 2004

O. In recent years, there has been a boom in naturalistic “adult” dolls, many of which “share” their buyers’ lives. This growth in sales corresponds with Eva Illouz’s explorations of *Cold Intimacies* (2007). RealDolls, as the products of a popular eponymous company are called, offer a projection screen that can replace the always strange and conflicting emotions tied to sexuality—that mix of passion, abandon, and aversion—and in so doing erase the moment of alterity that is necessary to every *relationship*. Every Other, no matter how much we are attracted to them, remains irritating, sometimes unbearably so. Lust is always ambivalent, both my own, if I allow myself to be vulnerable, as well as that of the Other, to the extent that it transcends boundaries. There is no desire without a sometimes alarming moment of violence. RealDolls obliterate this

experience, because nothing is shared. So one is not confronted by the ambiguity of one’s own excesses while one’s partner remains aseptic. Most noteworthy is the dolls’ unresponsiveness, even and especially if we are talking about state-of-the-art sex dolls that contain artificial intelligence. Even when subject to unrestrained human depravity, they do not offer the slightest resistance. Their desire is just as calculated as ours is to finally be free of constraints. Their expression of desire is as “safe” as it is “clean,” because the dolls embody the quintessence of the ideal of a passive and aseptic object that is accommodated to our tastes and always only wants what we ourselves want. *The Origin of the World*, as Gustav Courbet entitled his scandalous 1866 painting, a portrait of the dark loins of a, or rather *the*, woman, whose head is not visible, has made way for the origin of a new world. Elena Dorfmann has dedicated an entire series of photographs to this world, portraits of doll-like bodies in all shapes and sizes, like a catalog for diverse tastes, consumable by people with any variety of sexual proclivities.¹ The challenge presented by the flaccid and awkward “bodies” of these “living dolls”—which are just as lifeless as their even more provisional rubber predecessors,

¹ Elena Dorfman, https://www.modernisminc.com/exhibitions/Elena_DORFMAN--The-Origin-of-the-New-World/Elena_DORFMAN--The-Origin-of-the-New-World-1.jpg; ebenso: <https://www.elefordorfman.com/series>. See also *Diaphanes Magazine* No 5: <https://www.diaphanes.com/projekt/showmagazin/5781> (03.02.2022).

but now made of plastic with a light scent of silicone, an always open mouth and a mechanical voice—is to date them, to marry them, to take them out and “spend one’s life with them.”

1. The upsurge in RealDoll sales goes hand-in-hand with the very real “dollification” of the female body that, brought into line by diets, fitness programs, and plastic surgery, is increasingly modelled to achieve a doll-like ideal form. This can be witnessed not only in ubiquitous advertisements and films, or photos of supposed influencers, the “stars” of our decade, but also in women who have become surprisingly similar to life-size sex dolls—the best examples are the eccentric “real-life Barbies” Valeria Lukyanova and Angelica Kenova.²

On the other end of the scale and equally fitting, as well as equally eccentric, is the massification of social interactions with a barrage of scintillating artificial beings: robots, avatars, digital assistants, bots, animated life-like faces or “deep fakes” of historical events that never happened, and much more. The media is frequently flooded with sensational reports of machines that can act independently: artificial intelligence that can make autonomous decisions, engage in meaningful conversation, pass the Turing test, or paint, compose music, or write poetry or screenplays that human recipients cannot identify as machine-made. Then why not also artificial (love) relationships or sexual adventures?

It is a fantasy that is as old as the invention of personal computers in the 1970s. From the start, the generation of hippies who launched the digital wave had visions of skin sensors with which telematic caresses could be exchanged over great distances.

It seems that one of the main fruits of the so-called digital cultures is illusion, radical simulation, the “as if.” The Turing test was already about systematically fooling us. This is all the more true of the plethora of new pieces of music composed as if by Vivaldi or Beethoven, or new films as if James Dean or Marilyn Monroe had risen from the dead to play in them or Stanley Kubrick or Martin Scorsese to direct them. We are confronted with an abundance of unknown blockbusters and also new novels crafted seemingly as artfully as those written by human authors.

“As if” is the signature of the digital era, to which the technical innovation and perfection of RealDolls clearly belong. Like avatars in computer games, they are put together from selectable attributes, so that their use is dependent upon features that can be chosen according to a logic of decision. These features include height, body type, hair and skin tones, sex, genitals, and a rudimentary AI that pretends to speak its own desires and enjoy them amid much moaning.

Unlike human simulacra from previous centuries—Baroque automata, for example—these figures have an “ontology” that has clearly been modeled after the illusion machine run by the large film studios. They aim to be inscrutable, to be misconstrued—the opposite of enlightenment—as if being and appearance, *sein* and *schein*, were the same. It is no longer by any means a question of seeing through an illusion with deconstructive indifference, but of the “exact,” mathematical production of simulacra that refuse to be recognized as such. Their principle is the duplication of the masquerade, or the masking of the



FIG. 2

VALERIA LUKYANOVA AS A ‘REAL’ BARBIE DOLL
SEE [HTTPS://AT.WIKIMANNIA.ORG/VALERIA_LUKYANOVA](https://at.wikimannia.org/valeria_lukyanova)

² See https://at.wikimannia.org/Angelica_Kenova and https://at.wikimannia.org/Valeria_Lukyanova (03.02.2022).



ALLISON DE FREN. *THE MECHANICAL BRIDE* (2012),
STILL FRAME (2013)

without mimesis? And let us not forget that *mimesis* was once an ethical category that placed human simulation below the unachievable creative power of the divine, underscoring its secondary status among the simulative practices. In this case, conversely, the genuine ethical character of everything constructive is denied in order to elevate the copy as original through the inability to differentiate between being and appearance, between truth and falsity. In Jean Baudrillard's explication of the two types of mimetic economies, the first is based upon a principle of representation that assumes the coextension of sign and reality, while in the second there is a radical negation of the character of the sign itself, which disappears together with the principle of reality (Baudrillard 1994: 6).

However, we should not be fooled. This simulation operates only on the level of the diagrammatic. Its only reality is graphic or functional. Wherever machines produce artworks that cannot be distinguished from artistic production, where avatars and other artificial organisms seem to be interchangeable with real ones, and where RealDolls based on the absence of the Other promise to nevertheless satisfy social needs, there, *aisthesis* alone reigns. And its dominion is spread by objects, modeled after criteria of supposed beauty, that can do nothing but submit themselves to consumption. Human perception is easily deceived, because sight and hearing cannot distinguish between artificiality and reality, eyes and ears are correspondingly candidates for technical reproduction. This does not hold true for touch, taste, or smell, the 'existential' senses in the true meaning of the word, which remain skeptical of artefacts. Touch contains an elemental dialectic in which it can only touch that which it allows itself to be touched by, just as taste and smell are senses that must be materially incorporated (Mersch 2002: 30ff.; 2001).

masking, so that their *pseudos* can simultaneously be covered up and present itself as truth. Historically, the image never sought to be the same as reality, despite the competition for as exact a replica of the world as possible, despite all the antique myths surrounding Zeuxis and Parrhasias. Marionettes were never supposed to be living creatures, the story of Pinocchio aside, but always only a caricature of human movement. The masks of diverse cultures never tried to copy the other face of the spirits or the ancestors, but always aimed only to get closer to the riddle of alterity. The RealDolls in contrast want to be closer to hyperrealism, to transcend and obliterate all differences so as to fake one thing above all: *identity*. The telos of the image is dissimilarity, the telos of the toy doll is proxy, a substitute for the absence of the mother, and that of the mask is the remembrance of the inaccessibility (*Unverfügbarkeit*) of the source of life. Sexualized artificial dolls, however, promise real gratification—and without the unbearable aspects of the body of an Other, with its sweat, and secretions, and chronic resistance. In this way, the simulative performances of the present—of which RealDolls are perhaps only an extreme example—usurp reality in a kind of reverse Platonism in which *eidola* are no longer copies of *ideai*, but rather surfaces of ideal forms of which the “real world” merely embodies a flawed likeness. They deceive beyond the deception and so advance to become the true ‘being’.

But where does this need come from for appearance to lie itself true or *Wahrlügen*, to speak with Günther Anders? What is the origin of this ravenous desire for mimesis

For that reason, these senses are always conscious of the artificiality of the simulated body and its plastic skin, which can arouse only a paradoxical desire that feeds on the visual and acoustic alone and is bound to remain deficient and be frustrated, lacking as it does the copulins and pheromones that drive sexual urges. Optical and sonic simulation are thus necessarily reductive, while the technical reproduction of tactile and olfactory stimuli, which have a passive nature and vouch for the existence of an alterity, inevitably become monstrous, because they “re-construct” life itself and so must simulate that which was first made possible by simulation. Thus an ineradicable residue remains, an irreducibility that births the grotesque at the site where social life and that which holds it together, interpersonal relationships and also the libido, become the victim of simulacra. For nothing is freer of esprit and irony than a life together that takes place only on the plane of the imaginary.

2. With the above in mind, can love be imitated or can relationships to other people be “puppeted” without becoming theater or succumbing to the excesses of a rigorous egoism? Is friendship possible as similarity or “deep” lust possible in the mode of as-if? We should not forget that Sigmund Freud attributed the binding force of society to the ‘eros’, which describes not only a drive but more importantly the energy and ability to relate to others and enter into a bond—in Latin: *religio*. We should therefore not misconstrue love, friendship, the desire for recognition or the longing for the Other as *emotions*, which we can also project onto autonomous objects, animals, or things—every child’s game demonstrates this possibility—for at most we endow objects with feelings that we have taken from other contexts, first and foremost from elementary social relationships. It is the fact that love exists, the attachment to another person, that makes it possible for us to see dolls, fetishized objects or souvenirs as libidinous. Similarly, the aim cannot be to program feelings as second-hand imitations and feed them to machines. For that, they would have to have already been programmed with these elementary forms of relationships and to have been taught the ambivalences of social life between devotion and aversion, desire and hate, as well as between violence and care, to name only a few. Intrinsic to every relationship is a conglomerate of contradictory, interconnected elements that must be seen as constitutive for sociality—these include vulnerability and trust, but also power and dependability as well as atonement and forgiveness and many more. Together, these form gradations of interactions that are linked with varying intensities to the ways in which we organize our relationships with others. More importantly they form a “knot” that cannot be unraveled, because attraction is always mixed with repulsion, and social acceptance with contempt and repression. There is no simple or frictionless relationship with those close to us, just as little as others act unambiguously in relation to us. And social interactions are made up of exactly this tension and ambiguity, an experience which has been carefully deleted, as it were, from relationships to dolls. These interactions form the basis for the oldest human systems of religious and political order, they were already taken into consideration in the Jewish ten commandments, the Christian doctrine of the seven deadly sins, and Solon’s laws in ancient Greece. These embody nothing other than a constant effort to give contour to or frame social life, and to mark the degradation thereof as a sacrilegious breach of taboo. Eva Illouz (2007: 2) has described such emotions as “pre-social” and conversely analyzed their cultural meaning as inextricable intertwined with the complex fabric of social relations. These cannot be replaced by a noncommittal game of feigned relationships.

That in turn means that the way in which we live out our sexuality is by no means our private affair, but always also expresses a political culture. Whether we live together with dolls, robots, or avatars, accept them as partners, meet them with tolerance or disdain, or treat them as equals or as slaves has not only individual but also social relevance and has bearing upon our understanding of ourselves as human beings. For desire is not to want, but to answer, just as love does not mean to want to love, but rather the passion of love, as Niklas Luhmann (1986) has suggested, is always complexly coded. Without the cumbersomeness of the Other, without their resistance, as well as without dialogue with and the passivity and

elusiveness of alterities, this passion is unthinkable. Similarly, the simulation of love is an indignity, just as conversely a loving gaze that falls upon a machine misses its mark because it cannot meet that which love meets: the freedom of the Other. Machines can love just as little as they can be free, because they have no alternatives. Likewise, communication is more than simply information exchanged like goods that are transported from one person to another and that can also be entrusted to an automaton. Rather it draws from a contrast of positions, from the reply of a different voice, and from attention and hearing, which presuppose recognition and meeting someone halfway, as well as the interdependence of ‘response-ability’.

Hence the modes of relationship that are woven into communication are of a fundamentally different type than that with all technological artefacts, whether humanoid or other artificial beings, because the face of the Other is what first constitutes ‘me’ as partner and ‘I’ cannot avoid that it sometimes makes me feel uncertain, attacked, or ‘outfaced.’ The connotations of the contours of the face of the Other are, like all of the social categories discussed here, primarily ethical, and their genuine ethicalness consists, according to Emmanuel Lévinas (1991: 199), in the simultaneous directive: “you shall not commit murder.” In fact, the gaze of the other touches me with a force that makes violence possible only in combination with a grave lack of conscience. The “doctors” who repair RealDolls report of the stunning brutality with which these are sometimes “treated,” eclipsed solely by the way in which we treat other living creatures.

Instead, we must distinguish between relationships and relations, as their confusion leads to an error of categories. We have relations in the main with objects, including technical machines, fetish-objects, and humanoid dolls, whether we talk with them like

living actors or consume them as things, while a relationship has an elementary draw fomented initially by the Other. Relations denote formal correlations such as those that appear in networks and can be expressed graphically. Hence the net of relations that connects us to things, artefacts, technologies, and RealDolls, may be grounded in emotions, but it remains fundamentally neutral. Correspondingly, it would be strange to call a friendship a “relation” and not a “relationship” and to deny the draw of as well as the withdrawal from the Other, because it would mean taking an attitude of indifference from the beginning, the exact opposite of the equally normative and intimate connection that constitutes a friendship. Friendships are furthermore grounded in mutual trust. Trust is the source of their energy, which has no basis but itself, for one can only trust in trust. Relations in contrast, because their aim is functional, can at most hope for reliability, no matter how much happiness and satisfaction is projected onto them.

Proposals have been made to see human-machine relations—and the argument would apply to human-doll marriages—from the perspective of ethical behaviorism and to accept them

for pragmatic reasons, asking “why not”? (Danaher 2019) Yet this pragmatism flattens every kind of incommensurability, whose levelling is the sign of an inherent social alienation. Pragmatically, and also technically, human-artefact relations—including a harmonious life together with RealDolls and other sex robots—are conceived only as one-

sided vectors from human to thing. This in turn implies a reductive model of the social that does not even include participation and equal interdependence, not to mention recognition and responsivity and therefore also responsibility. Wherever relationships are reduced to



FIG. 4
ALLISON DE FREN. *THE MECHANICAL BRIDE* (2012), STILL FRAME (2013)

relations, we are dealing with manifest social pathologies or distortions. These are perhaps characteristic for an epoch of technological rationalities, just as the boom in RealDolls is perhaps a symptom of a loss stemming from the substitution of humanity and its social signature with a frictionless functionalism, in order to skirt the problem of the uncontrollable and unrestrained Other.

Like toys, artificial bodies and machines allow themselves to be manipulated and moved about on the public and the private stage to fulfil our purpose of the moment. However a human being, to remain human, must, according to Immanuel Kant (1996: 80), always only be an end in itself and not a means, which would have to also be true for apparatuses, humanoids, and dolls if we claim them to be capable of relationships.³ What makes friendships and love relationships with robots and other artificial beings pathological, is the contradiction of a game that is played while simultaneously denying that it is a game, so that, in a calculated move, it becomes serious. It then becomes understandable why RealDolls must conform exactly to all rules of the social order and its rituals in order to function as “real.” They make up the religious rites of a repression. And at least some doll owners celebrate quasi-weddings with their RealDolls, down to the details of a wedding dress and the famous threshold over which the wife is carried into her new home.

3. The above is in no way simply a moral judgement nor does it mean to simply address the ethical dilemmas that arise in dealing with robots, artificial intelligence, and other simulated doppelgänger, especially where they take on the role of actors and make “autonomous” decisions, forced to choose between equal options without possessing *logical* criterium. More important is the shame-ridden discovery that RealDolls in particular, like sexual robots in general, as an extreme example of “autonomous” technical systems, not only submit themselves to and obey one person in particular, but to all others as well in the same way. Their functionality is always shared and therefore “in-different” because it applies equally to all. Formal relations do not choose, they are on principle equitable and thus as promiscuous as *Her* voice in the eponymous movie by Spike Jonze (2013), which seems to speak directly to the lovestruck protagonist, but is also directed to millions of others. In the case of the RealDolls this becomes even more “scandalous” when they passively, without emotion or any difference in reaction, give in to whatever is demanded of them, no matter how abusive. Perhaps we should think, ironically, of those who visit sex doll bordellos (which can now be found in Barcelona, Prague, and also Germany under the name “bordolls”) as people who have great powers of invention or, better, nothing but a vivid imagination, which is nevertheless not so developed that they could imagine living with another human being.⁴ Where their imagination falls short is at what it means to act as a human, because in meeting a RealDoll they meet at best an image that depicts the phallogocentric telos of every connection as a libidinous phantasm, whereby the Other is fixed immovably in the position of an object of dominion, ruled by the gaze. Kant’s categorical imperative seems to be suspended here. But moral dilemmas, which are always also social dilemmas, are not erased together with its suspension, but only made greater. Does one implicate oneself as the guest of a doll bordello looking for aseptic satisfaction, because as “John” one’s actions tend to abase one’s sex partner—even if only delegated—by turning them into an object? If one owns such a bordello, is that equivalent to acting as a pimp and is one subject to the full force of the law? If someone is already married when they engage with a RealDoll, have they had an affair or is it an adventure that does not change the status of their faithfulness? Is one a bigamist if, married, one keeps a sex doll as an inexpensive concubine? Can one rape a doll—the quintessence of lifeless passivity—or does perhaps every sexual act with a doll have rape character? If a doll is damaged in the frenzy of someone’s drives, is it a sublimated crime? And aren’t dubious offers of sex dolls to live out the most monstrous phantasies an open invitation to unbridled aggression? And, finally, can an apology or atonement for damages incurred—even if only slight—help heal the doll? Whoever

³ This formulation is part of Kant’s categorical imperative, the principle that holds for all rational beings: “So act that you use humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means.”

⁴ See for example <https://www.bordoll.de/> (02.02.2022)

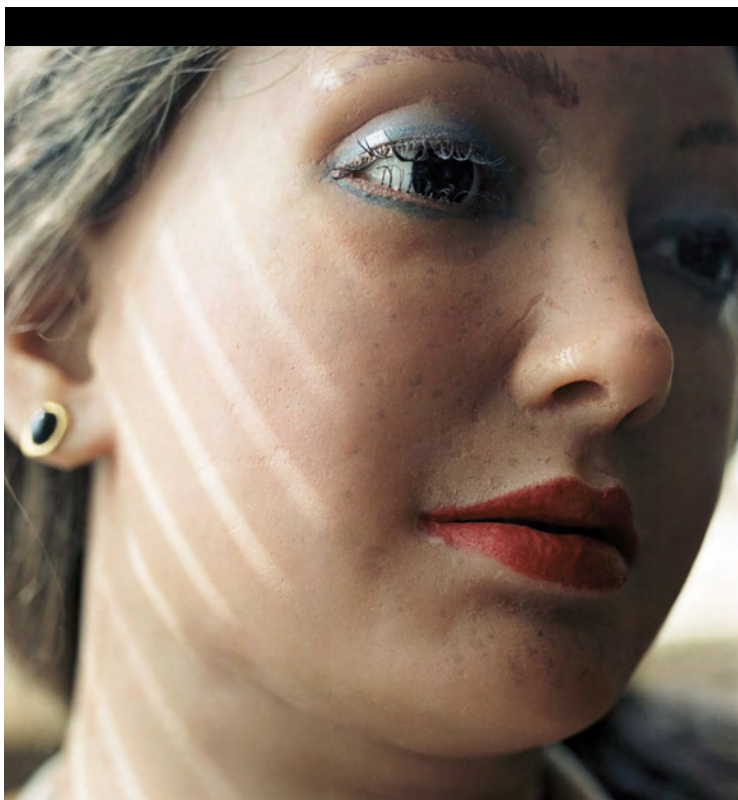


FIG. 5
ALLISON DE FREN. *THE MECHANICAL BRIDE* (2012),
STILL FRAME (2013)

answers all of these questions with “no” has already admitted that there is a fundamental heterogeneity between the social and the technological, between social relationships and relations, and therefore also between human and mechanical connections.

We must therefore assume a world of strange objects and strange connections from which a comprehensive ethnography of the present could be developed that includes not only sex dolls, but also and more importantly care robots and the many communication avatars of which it remains systematically unclear what they are and what we think they are. Neither thing nor non-thing, neither social actor nor asocial element, they are not an *imitatio dei*, but rather an *imitatio homini* limited at most to recursive superficialities but never able to truly meet, speak to, look at, challenge, or stand up to us. Since the gaze, it is said, is the last thing that can be mechanized, these figures stare ceaselessly at us with dead eyes, always friendly and compliant, but never meaning it. When

we do not look at them, they are at our mercy, when we do, we remain lonely, without a witness to our acts and so unworthy of either love or blame. It is therefore not difficult to imagine how our future with them will look. It is not only RealDolls that are everywhere and nowhere “there” for us, but an entire arsenal of androids that are at our service: as information personnel at shop-

ping centers, as diagnosticians in hospitals, as brokers at virtual stock markets, as auditors of our credit-worthiness, as patient aides in old age homes and hospitals, as strict enforcers of traffic regulations, as teachers that always remain objective and never tire of fulfilling their role. Most disturbing is, without a doubt, the mechanized military, police, and jurisprudence, within which there is absolutely no human hesitation, no scruples, no individual case histories that deserve to be taken into account. But whatever our future looks like, the decisive question remains of what kind of sociality is able to develop in this way, and what shall be understood under sociality and its key principle of *koinonia*, because it is difficult to imagine any kind of *koinonia* under these conditions, but instead little more than granulate, a scattering. This means we must at the same time ask what RealDolls, as the perhaps most spectacular form of these hybrid cyborgs, and also all other digital assistants, avatars, robots, and technical systems do *with us*. What do they make out of us and how do and will they change our specific sense of identity, community, alterity, time, history, and death? Perhaps in the future happiness will mean transforming ourselves into statues of our own memories.

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