

PROMETHEAN SHAME? PANDORA REFRAMES: ELENA DORFMAN'S *ORIGIN OF THE NEW WORLD*

OR, DIGITAL ARTS AND MATERIAL CRITICISM IN THE BREACH

JAMES TOBIAS

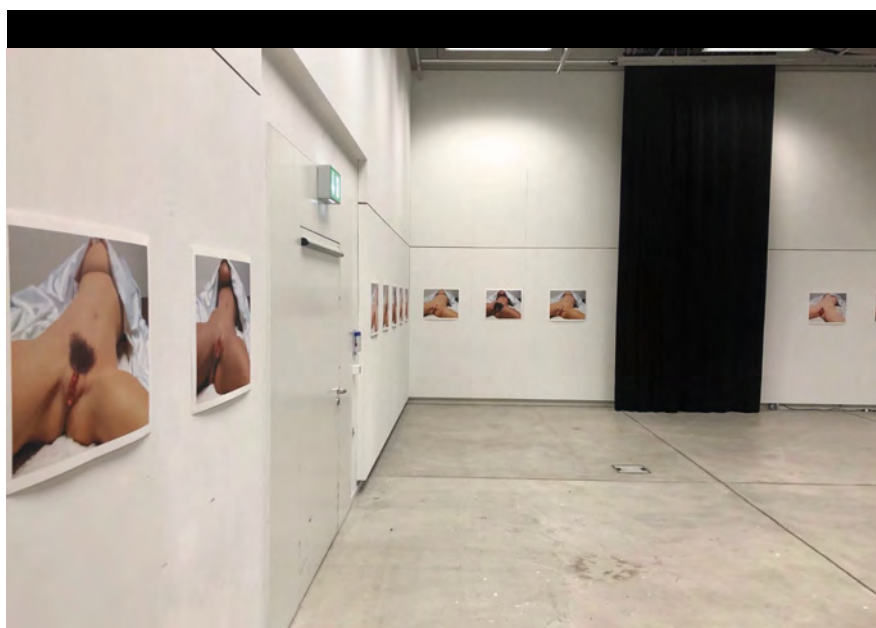


FIG. 1

ELENA DORFMAN, *ORIGIN OF THE NEW WORLD*,
INSTALLATION VIEW, ZÜRICH UNIVERSITY OF
THE ARTS, DECEMBER 2018

The digital prints line up across a wall, marching into and out of a corner of a common room in an arts university where a symposium has been taking place. The “V” shape of the march of images, in their seriated projection across the now extended corner of the room, suggests the perspectival vanishing point within each photographic scene whereby a triangle repeats: at the apex, above, a single breast; one thigh forms the lower left corner as it exits the frame; across the pudenda the third corner is formed by a knee at the lower right of the frame. Within each triangulated scene repeats an assemblage of silicon

body parts—specifically, in the foreground, pudenda decorated with more or less fuzzy clouds of hair, and foreshortened, as each view is, to emphasize the vulva or penis modeled within each image, the variously sized single-breast reclin-

ing away from the viewer. Elena Dorfman's series *Origin of the New World* remodels and remakes Courbet's 1865 *Origin of the World* as a parade of factory-made, interchangeable silicone parts, artfully applied lighting and makeup, and digital framing and printing attached

simply, but also precisely, to two walls of the symposium space. One reaction I noticed was to feel vaguely aroused—you may choose the gender of your interest to fixate upon, but nevertheless, you don't commit, your eye wanders, one can't decide—but also neutral and neutralized at the same time, in a kind of grating tension, as if one had taken beta-blockers in order to enter a sex shop (one that happens to be particularly and unusually attentive to product spacing, print quality, and visual and spatial presentation) in order not to have to feel forced to react to the provocations of the products displayed there. Your reflexive positioning in the materialized, metered corner as it folds out into the symposium room—that's the reaction, it precedes you, and it follows you, and you know it. This is your work space.

On the far right of the right wall where the prints continue their march, and anchoring this complex assemblage of scene, space, and positioning, is a curtain. Behind this curtain, a lightbox is hung—as if, here, enshrouded and reserved for a brief moment of secret pleasure, we find the origin of this second coming—or perhaps its conclusion. You went behind the curtain, you found a mirrored surface, your own image looking back at you; turning on the machine's light, your face fades to be softly superimposed over another of the images of silicon pudenda. The sense given is that what might have been assembled as a scene of conversation between the viewer and the artwork, or of supplication, between the adorer and the divine, instead turns into a kind of demonstrative mismatch: your eyes, your nose, your face, but less visible than “her” lost modesty, her exposed breast, her disappeared face.

The disappearance is forced and it is double; first, Courbet's model (now thought to be dancer Constance Queniaux) is disappeared all over again, as she was in Courbet's work; but then, too, so is Courbet's rendering of Queniaux as faceless also, itself, disappeared. The violent double logic is made patent: your face only appears to you to the extent that hers disappears from “her body.” No mistake about it, whether masculine-endowed or feminine-endowed or trans-endowed, these are objects whose strangeness has to do with their status not simply as objects but as tools, tools for seeing, seeing not simply into the image or its framing, but also the platform of knowledge-making on which the image is displayed. These images are instruments for viewing processes of feminization, racialization, sexing, upon the larger platform where the human is synthesized. So I refer to the body of the entire series in terms of feminization, as “her body”—but to be clear, this is a montage of bodies and occasions. I'm not referring, only, to female gender, or to processes of engendering. Feminization, racialization, sexing, and instrumentalization—not subjectification, not objectification, I think—is what Elena Dorfman's *Origin of the New World* makes patent. And there is violence captured and contained, demonstrated, made diagnosable, in each image, in the projection of the series into and out of the corner, across the walls, in the pseudo-privacy of the lightbox and its curtained scenarization—violence in the technical reduction of the raced, gendered body to silicon molding, to perspectival imaging, violence in the reduction of desire to fetish. If the photographs themselves are staged documents, they are also persuasive demonstrations, a balance of aesthetic experience and essayistic display.

So the putatively neuter space of academic research or aesthetic exhibition is revealed—lit up, we might say, as if in a flash—as a staging platform for the way in which aesthetic research can, in the form of an exhibition, prompt, even format, the preparation and presentation of scholarly exploration. And the space so designed makes clear the demands on contemporary academics to inform our work with understandings, if not theories, of power and of violence, specifically in relation to processes and projections of racialization and engendering and sexing. But this display also reveals the violence of the very notion of the public under which academics labor in the belief that at some appropriate point we must enter into the public, take part in a forum, mediate art and public in some impossibly ethical fashion. Impossible, because if violence informs the formation of knowledge, ethics is challenged to differentiate itself from a violence ethics must deny, or simply descend into or reveal its own violences. This dynamic is in part what scholarly engagement on the actor and the avatar reveals as needing to be taken into account.

And indeed when the symposium ended, and most of the scholars left, and the public entered, another kind of violence, violence carrying violent threat, came with it. As Nadja Ben Khelifa, one of the scholars who took part in the “Uncanny Valley” symposium around the square of tables across the way from the “V” of Elena Dorfman’s witting, sensuous, engaged display of unwitting, unfeeling and unthinking yet technically precise pudenda, tells it, the violence captured and contained in Dorfman’s work found its reflexive enactment in what was, this time, an *unfortunately* demonstrative encounter with the public.

A man entered the symposium and exhibition space, screaming in Swiss German. Surprised, and unaccustomed to the dialect, ben Khelifa asks what he is talking about, and informs him in no uncertain terms that she will not be shouted at in such a way. He insists that his “macho” behavior is to be allowed in this “common” space whether she likes it or not—and, well, here it is in a nutshell—a demonstration of the fact that the technological architecting of “the common” and the “shared” are premised on a properly violent disciplining of racialization, engendering, sexing.

Walking towards the man, ben Khelifa informs him that he is welcome to view the exhibition—and I wonder: perhaps he would learn to see that his own character is foreseen, formatted to be demonstrated in the “V” of marching, reclining, presenting pudenda, although perhaps not in such realistic or naturalistic ways. But, ben Khelifa makes clear, he can see the images, and he’s not allowed to shout at her or intimidate her. With her approach, she aims to show the familiar stranger who feels strangely at home in the common space shared by artistic research and scholarly presentation that she won’t be intimidated by his violent behavior or his implied violence. She thinks, though, that her voice, less confident, may be giving her away. The man takes a step towards the series of images—as if he might deface them, that is, might deface their demonstration of his own violent identity made visible as violence in the expanded “V” of Dorfman’s cornered, silicon-molded, faceless and so sensate but non-sentient pudenda. Apparently his shame takes over for his rage; he fails, more an avatar of violent action to come than an actor of violence in the academic scene. Security is notified; the man, now a violent phantasm more than a violent act threatening violence, fades away into the halls of the academy of art. Ben Khelifa described this incident as a kind of “*Taxi Driver*” moment; reflecting that logic, we might see that the university, for the self-appointed arbiter of public discourse and public space, becomes a site of iniquity replacing the infested streets of New York City; that the subject to be saved by the pseudo-historical actor is an avatar of silicone and light; and that “the pimp” is somehow now supposed to be the scholar-curator guiding the public actor through the labyrinth of the technologically embodied present.

Obviously, there’s more to be said about the powerful images that hung on those walls. The variations of their seriation deserves mention: a tiny phallus competes to replace a larger one at the wandering pleasure of the viewer; skin tones and volumes jostle in the feeling eye’s redoubt as our bewildered look travels from image to image; pubic hair can seem clown-like in color or oddly mowed; the single breasts forming the apex of the visual triangle composing each image rise and fall as they repeat from one image to the next, as if in a natural evolutionary variation of the logistics of securing, pouring, and polishing silicone rubber. Of course the strange, sad, violent macho failed in his mission and had to run away—where would he even begin if his task was to restore masculine pseudo-integrity with such an overwhelming and productive series of projections put in play between actor and avatar in this space? How would one failed subject and their one sad body attain to the larger implications of racialized, engendering, sexing bodies diagrammed in Dorfman’s corner of proliferating pudenda? The tiny cock makes the point: to demonstrate engendering, racializing, sexing in terms of instruments’ relations to other instruments—where “ubiquitous instrumentality” is a speculative thesis suggesting test conditions for thinking about the way we imagine “technological being” “being everywhere”—is to demonstrate *lack* of development, immaturity, failed organization, incapacity, the neoteny of the avatar as social actor and of the social media subject.

But if, as Terry Winograd long ago observed, computers work almost by default as social actors, it's a complex contradiction in terms to speak of a "social media subject"—this contradiction is worth unpacking. While the avatar as a site of digitally mediated performance may be conceived in terms of contradictions of digital selfhood, it's important to point out that beyond the logistics of projecting, enacting, and archiving digital identity, avatar performance works not simply as mask but also as costume, and demonstrates a derealizing of embodiment as much as a logistics of managing identity. At stake in this derealization, too, seems to be a kind of shame at the sight of, and at the virtual touch of, a particular technological style of synthesizing the human. This shame might be "Promethean shame," but, indeed, to demonstrate Promethean shame in this fashion suggests an artful synthesis of aesthetics with ethical claim-making: here, artistic practice and critical praxis work together to counter the inculcation and indulgence of Promethean shame and the violences we can associate with it.

Günther Anders argued in his 1956 chapter "On Promethean Shame" (Anders 2016), part of his book "Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen", that the sheer advanced quality of modern technological objects produced a kind of existential shame in the contemporary human subject:

"When humans suffer from feelings of inferiority in the face of their machines, then they do so, primarily because they are forced to realize—in their attempt to measure up to their machines—that they are a 'poor quality' raw material when it comes to being moulded into this or that machine part. Instead of actually being raw material, humans are 'unblessed' morphologically because they are already pre-given. Moreover, every pre-given form turns out to be 'wrong' and 'already pressed into the wrong shape', because in each instance the actual form machines require varies. In 'human engineering' people attempt to 'melt down' this 'misshapen form' in order to retroactively source the material from which the required shape at any particular time can still be made" (Anders 2016: 51).

Anders postulated "sexual shame" as the quintessential form of shame. Since shame as inability or failure means it is associated with negative intentionality, is beyond choice and freedom, is improper to the individual, more related to "the it" than to the subject proper, so shame has thus to do with a conflict between being a subject and being a thing. Since sex, for Anders, was pre-given, thought to underlie but be beyond intentionality, and connoted rather negative intentionality, the inferior and unblessed, for all these reasons "one's sex is a pudendum, (...) something of which one is ashamed" (ibid.: 67). With Promethean shame, though, Anders argues, we take account of another "it," that of the technological device. "We can, in a sense, picture the human—and this is now truly only an image—as clamped between two brackets, as if constrained by two forces that both challenge the 'self': on the one side the human is constrained by the 'natural it' (by the body, sex and species, and so forth) and on the other side by the 'artificial' (bureaucratic and technological) 'it of the technological device'. The space left open for the 'self' is [in 1956] getting smaller, while the danger that the 'self' is crushed by these two colossal non-individual forces is daily increasing" (ibid.: 76).

Some seventy years later, it is clear that both to the side of "body, sex and species" and also to the side of "bureaucratic and technological artifice" we must gain specificity by introducing "racializing," "engendering," and "sexing" descriptors; and that the cybernetic advance of Promethean shame now requires "the it" to be not simply "the machine" but also to be understood as involving the complex relation of machines to machines. A "ubiquitous instrumentality" discursively constitutes an improper and unrigorous surrogation of historical conditionality in too many accounts of avatarial action—as if networked machines could absorb into their calculating operations the disparate and discontinuous histories that produced them. Identifying and naming this false premise in this way is one way of revising

popular theories of Silicon Valley's supposedly cybernetic imaginary of avatars holding our place as we stumble into the merchandized technological future, and of re-thinking ideas about "the California ideology" as a kind of neoliberal symptom.

And this is where Dorfman's installation of *Origin of the New World* not only prompts and engages with critical discourse, not only distills a kind of iconoclastic platforming responding to and cutting off at its knees that form of iconomania whereby the images of celebrity, of governing authority, and of ubiquitous technological instrumentality seek to flourish and triumph in their unblessed, misbegotten wills to power. Dorfman's work says you can have it all now—all the racing, sexing, gendering you can consume—but you can't have any of it and remain visible to yourself as yourself. Still, her critical referencing of Courbet and the history of art also reminds us, you didn't have yourself as such to begin with. The result is a short circuit that leads to a breach, and there's no way out but forward in some non-continuous leap over the looming void. Aesthetic experience here forces critical engagement where the social actor and the networked avatar disappear into one another. We must invent another style of technological life.



FIG. 2

ELENA DORFMAN, *STILL LOVERS* (2001–04)

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