

## Beautification and Regulation

Jaenine Parkinson

TOKI, the virtual character created by Hye Rim Lee, has been developed across mediums. She acts as a locus for many poignant debates, over topics ranging from computer gaming to plastic surgery, which incite a convergence between technology and feminist concerns. TOKI has been, until recently, an identity in formation. Although TOKI has reached a significant stage in her development with the exhibition *Powder Room*, there is no doubt that she will continue to evolve and her identity change, since she will someday act as an avatar in a computer game interacting with other characters. As a virtual body under continual formation, TOKI demonstrates the malleability and instability of identity and its performative nature.

In *Lash* (2005) the first stage of TOKI's formation is resolved, she has grown up, and become much more seductive, she is no longer as typically cute as she was in *The Birth of TOKI* (2003) series. Her sexuality is now emphasised as a major dimension of her personality. TOKI has absorbed and embodied the extreme imperatives of globalised westernised fashion and ideal beauty. From her conceptual origins through to her presentation in *Powder Room* TOKI's body has been simultaneously the spectacle, the performance space, the subject, and the object of pleasure and danger.<sup>1</sup>

TOKI is a surreal psychic projection fashioned not merely from Lee's own individual subjectivity but created from a fusion with technology, science-fiction, myth and the euphoria of late capitalist globalised culture.<sup>2</sup> TOKI is a hybrid malleable creature, equal parts technological, mythical, sexual, feminine and cute, deriving from Lee's own personal experiences and the cultural narratives she is attuned to. Throughout *The Birth of TOKI* series and beyond Lee has explored TOKI's position as a cyborg, a product of technology and fantasy with an underlying streak of malevolence. TOKI's digitalisation contains a subliminal threat of a consumer culture, which promotes simulation and superficiality over substance and depth. TOKI, as the child of assembly line mechanical reproduction and the Venus of post-industrialisation and global consumerism, is flawlessly simulated and superficially crafted. She is the product of the technologised perfection and commodification of the female body.

The gaze that constructs the female body as an object continues to press on TOKI's self image. Throughout TOKI's development this judgmental gaze has been steadily internalised through a process of self-regulation and examination. TOKI continually monitors and regulates herself, subjecting herself to a process

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<sup>1</sup> Linda S. Kauffman, *Bad Girls and Sick Boys: Fantasies in Contemporary Art and Culture* University of California Press, California, 1998, p 15

<sup>2</sup> Thyrsa Nichols Goodeve, "Mariko Mori's Cyborg Surrealism" *Parkett* no.54, 1998/9, p 102

of persistent renovation and improvement in an attempt to achieve the ideal laid out for her by global consumerism. The small, circular and close up format of the four images that make up *Powder Room* (2005) allude to a view in a compact mirror. It seems that we voyeuristically watch TOKI as she examines and perfects herself to exacting standards. The compact mirror, a portable examination device, attests to TOKI's constant presence under a critical gaze, both of others and now, with these rules and judgements internalised, her own. In *Powder Room* and the earlier work *BOOM BOOM: super heroine super beauty* (2004) reference is made to the extreme form of body modification now undertaken by women through plastic surgery. Honing in on areas of 'interest' TOKI is minutely crafted and perfected, under the point of the mouse, which acts like a virtual cosmetic surgeon's knife. TOKI goes under the knife for the same reasons as the performance artist Orlan — to expose the strenuous processes undertaken by women in order to achieve ideal beauty. Lee comments that through TOKI she “questions the myth of technological perfection and by association, our modern obsession with transformation.”<sup>3</sup>

Powder rooms conjure up images of beautification and gossip; this very couth term shrouds the fact that these rooms are actually designed for very practical, physical and not-so-pretty events. Similarly, the real, lived and physical experience of women has been concealed, idealised, edited and retouched in representations of the female body from Botticelli's *Venus* to *Vogue*, all of them chasing the elusive quality of beauty. Generally, female genitalia are concealed in these depictions. In *Super Toy* (2005) TOKI's private parts have been included in the process of beautification and regulation. Lee reveals how far these regulating norms have encroached on the female body, colonising formally private parts. The sight of a naked body has at all times evoked powerful feelings and emotions: from fear, shame, and vulnerability to shock, awe, disgust, and power. Through the strength of these images Lee provokes us to confront our reactions, ask ourselves what are we comfortable with, what are we uncomfortable with, and why?

The technologised gaze that oppresses on TOKI is one of cold appraisal of her body as something to be upgraded and perfected. But is resistance for TOKI futile? Is her ability to subvert these stereotypes limited? Does her hyper-conformity demonstrate our inability to challenge expectations and the desire, cultivated by consumerism, to mould ourselves to fit the ideal? On inspection it seems that TOKI's actions, as she pouts, blows kisses and coyly sighs, represent a knowing teasing of these seductive and pleasurable performances of femininity. This, accompanied by Lee's methodology of exposing the digital medium that constructs and perfects TOKI's body, highlights the objectifying gaze of digitalised imagery and opens the way to the formation of a critical appraisal of TOKI's situation. *Powder Room* (2005), *BOOM BOOM: super heroine super beauty* (2004) and the digital prints *Mesh*, *Patch and Smooth*, *The*

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<sup>3</sup> Hye Rim Lee “Artists Statement” in Hanna Scott *Arcadia: the Other Life of Video Games* Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth, 2003, p 30

*Birth of TOKI series* (2003) all present TOKI as a digital object and thus infinitely malleable and impressionable, as well as objectified for public inspection and the male gaze. Through these works we see that TOKI is a construction. The ideals that she embodies and performs are constructions. Witnessing the process of her construction exposes the extremism of some of the feminine identities that women perform, and are expected to perform, following a globalised consumer culture dominated by western ideals of beauty.

Through TOKI Lee demonstrates that body politics and the need to address the representation of women is not a resolved issue, but an ongoing conversation. Hers is a paradoxical position to be in; being conscious of feminist issues that criticise the objectification and commodification of the female body in contemporary imagery, whilst also taking pleasure in these images and the beautification of the body. Lee has demonstrated that simply rejecting sexualised images of women dominated by the male gaze, is not complex enough to deal with the issue. Simple rejection does not address how women enjoy being sexy, enjoy their bodies, and enjoy feeling beautiful and desirable.

This ambivalence is presented in Lee's approach in developing TOKI. The extreme, constructed nature of TOKI's perfection destabilises the ideals that she embodies. Continually upgraded, designed and mass-produced, TOKI even has her own inflatable marketing figurine *MiniTOKI* (2002 - present). In Lee's multimedia performance piece *TOKIland* (2003) TOKI was mechanically duplicated to amass an army of android bunny-girls. The interchangeability of the TOKI clones begins a critical commentary on the way in which the power of the ideal, propagated through technologies of communication and body modification, represses diversity in favour of homogeneity.

Lee constructs a critique from within. Her analysis of the power relationships, gender politics and feminine stereotypes swarming around women, and Asian women in particular, takes the outwardly ironic and cheerful tone of critique that pop art is notorious for. Lee presents a knowing and conscious display of enchantment with surface, newness, consumerism, and ultra cute, ultra sexy fiction. Whilst lavishing in the beauty and seduction of these cultural archetypes she surreptitiously critiques the extravagance that is relished. She questions and teases such willingness to accept the sexy, youthful and cute stereotypes that are fed through popular culture. In doing so Lee implicates the viewer's voyeurism and seduction in this circuit of critique. However, any critique evolving from Lee's exposure of the superficial and constructed nature of the ideals propagated about female bodies and sexuality must come from the viewer. It is possible that some viewers may be lured in by the seductiveness of TOKI's image, and be attracted by the luminous, perfect, digital surfaces. Others, though, may see the extreme nature of TOKI's hyper-idealisation, hyper-conformity and the exposure of her constructed nature as signposts signalling the way to critical appraisal.

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