

ORIENTALIZING SEXISM: HYE RIM LEE'S TOKI

Art practice, whether traditional, modern, or avant-garde, is always tempted by the ideal of the singular work, of the definitive rendition. The general public, through the romantic notion of the creative genius, is similarly inclined to attribute, even to mundane works, the tag of singularity. But for works that seek to engage with, rather than deconstruct, the imagery of popular culture the prevalence of images imposes a graphic constraint. Such work--think of Jeff Koons, for example--always draws upon the sensuous qualities of its model, even in the act of political critique. Indeed even deconstructive work may be drawn into the trap of celebrating those qualities it wishes to satirize.

This would especially seem to be the case with erotic or pornographic representation. So the problem is posed: how might the critique of the stereotypical, the specified, engage in the materials of fantasy without itself becoming a source of singular fascination? This is the task that Hye Rim Lee, a Korean-born digital media artist who resides in New Zealand, has set for herself. Through the creation of a virtual surrogate, TOKI, Lee has conceived an identity space where East meets West, and code becomes body. As a virtual being, TOKI invites a range of identity positions; an avatar standing for the artist herself, a digital persona which is, in some sense, alive, an animal mimicking human identity, a machine posing as human. TOKI is all of the above, but she refuses to be a model for any one of them. Instead, she seeks to inhabit the zone of "over-idealized" bodies--the tropic of Paris Hilton and her clones.

THE BODY AS CONTEXT

Never has the human body--above all the female body--been so massively manipulated as today ... And yet the process of technologization, instead of materially investing the body, was aimed at the construction of a separate sphere that had practically no point of contact with it: what was technologized was not the body but its image. (1)

The separation of the living body from its technologically produced image is a relationship of exploitation and domination. It is the body image, given the prestige and social penetration (supplied by the media) that sets the terms of reference for the look of the mundane body, its grooming and appearance. As studies have shown, media images influence the kind of attitude young girls and

women take toward their own bodies. Television, advertising, fashion, and images of women in magazines, who are 13 percent to 19 percent below their recommended healthy body weight by size, tend to increase the dissatisfaction of young girls and women with a more size-consistent body weight--an effect much less likely to be found among men. (2) The profusion of retouched and idealized body images has been connected to the epidemic of eating disorders and more pervasively to an obsession with beauty enhancements such as plastic surgery and body toning regimes. But looking good is not the same as being healthy. A kind of somatic indifference haunts the apparent perfection of media images.

In the West, the popularity of television shows such as *Extreme Makeover* and the influence of Hollywood's cut-and-patch celebrities has encouraged increasing numbers of women to take the surgical road to the dream self. The dream self is in itself a complex construction, part mental as a phenomenon of a wish for better self-esteem, and part an external media image that applies to every woman and no woman in particular. In the process of choosing to go under the knife, a real self and virtual self approach one another in a fantasy of re-incarnation. This fantasy seems most intense in Asia for reasons that are complexly intertwined in historical, economic, and physical realities.

Historically, in this region females have been regarded as the property of men as evidenced by traditional practices such as foot binding, breast binding, covering of the face, and confinement to the domestic sphere. From the point of view of the West, such practices seem outdated and barbaric, conflicting with the widely accepted principle that women should be permitted, within limits, to use their attractiveness to win a partner. The shift to a free choice in relationships and the perception of appearance as a marketable value is slowly developing in the East but it does so in a context in which traditional definitions of gender and the double standard are still widely recognized. Not unlike western men, many eastern men want their wives inexperienced and exclusively attuned to their particular sexual needs and capacities. Yet outside the marital home, men want

women to be available for casual sex and experienced in it. This double standard is, indeed, a feature of western culture as well. In Asia it is exacerbated by the high value placed on virginity in the marriage market. Torn between what men expect sexually, and the stigma of lost virginity, young women increasingly resort to surgically reinstated virginity through "vaginal rejuvenation" plastic surgery.

The dynamics of this double standard with its demands on female flesh are particularly pronounced in South Korea, Lee's country of birth. Korean women are much more likely to resort to cosmetic surgery in order to get a prized "Eurasian" look. In the United States only 3 percent of the general public have undergone cosmetic surgery, while the rate in Korea is 13 percent. (3) Again, western ideas of female beauty are prevalent because since 1994, the South Korean advertising industry has been permitted to use foreign models and celebrities to sell beauty products and services. Western models like Claudia Schiffer and Cindy Crawford extol a look that is the antithesis of the average Korean female whose shorter legs, wider face, and yellow skin are identified in the problem pages of popular magazines as barriers to perfection. Unlike in the West, where the demands of the fashion industry tend to be mitigated by concepts of individualism, in Korea the value placed on group identity leads to a greater degree of conformism. Females on the streets are more likely to be slavish clones of western fashion.

The embrace of westernized beauty standards is not without contradictions. The traditional Korean view of gender relationships is sharply at odds with western ideals. Wives are not viewed as the partners or equals of their husbands as can be the case in the West. A small symptom of the wife's subordinate status can be found in the fact that wives are expected to address their husbands as "father," thus assuming the same position as a child. More generally, in the dominant

Neo-Confucian tradition, women are regarded as mere vessels, destined to carry and preserve through caring for the family, the male essence or ki. In regards to existing mores, sexual relations between husband and wife are centered on serving the husband's needs with little regard for the wife's desires or preferences. Pre-marital relationships are expected to march to the same beat and any single female who exercises a degree of sexual freedom that might be common for women in the West, is stigmatized as a fallen woman. Despite the insistence of Korean men on wifely purity, the revenues from the sex trade (admittedly with encouragement from western sex tourists) amount to a staggering 4 percent of the Gross Domestic Product, with a yearly value of twenty-four trillion won. (4)

In the search for the prized westernized or Eurasian look, surgery bites and burns deep into the flesh. The skin becomes mask and the mask can be seen as female empowerment. Ironically, today's young Korean women are finding a ready-made freedom in westernized notions of beauty that effectively deny their cultural and biological heritage. There may be Happy Hookers out there but the smiles are generally as fixed as those that greet western tourists and men seeking mail-order brides. (5) The global traffic in sex makes the look a much sought-after commodity, which ideally can lead the bearer toward a secure job, a husband, and the chance to be someone--a star in one's own body.

DO BOY-MEN DREAM OF ELECTRIC HOOKERS?

What is true of technological innovation in general applies to electronic game culture. New technologies are introduced through non-threatening and natural-seeming feminine images. Sex sells, and the promise of virtual encounters has become a dominant marketing tool. Virtual babes--highly sexualized images of "girls" who promise to be the willing servants of male fantasies, have long served

as the preferred conduit through which to build a "game" of sexual and physical conquest. (6) Given this historical fusion of a certain version of female sexuality and electronic "life forms," how better to tempt the game player into a cathartic unravelling of sexual identity than to expose the interface between gender and its cybernetic image as a process of digital enforcement and discipline?

Drawing on the Japanese tradition of Manga and anime with its doe-eyed females, TOKI is a virtual babe with a difference--an avatar of Lee that represents the artist's exploration of the interface between digital art and identity. Unlike her sister digi-bodies Lara Croft, Anova, Syndi Myra, and, in a more intensively pornographic mode, Ultravixen, she is always a wry and slippery embodiment of the Playboy Bunny that translated to Korean has become her name. Like all virtual babes, TOKI enacts the male fantasy of the ever-available sexual partner, available to all and no one in particular. Standing for the enactment, in real time, of an over-programmed sexual response, she is a disincarnation of her virtual babe sisters.

It cannot be denied that game players yearn for data to become flesh. The popularity of the Nude Raider Patch, which when downloaded, removes Lara's clothes, testifies more to Lara's physical authority than to the power of the player to control the game. The same logic of acquiring sexual authority through subordination underwrites Ultravixen, probably the most extreme virtual babe. Ultravixen liquidates her archenemy by submitting to player-initiated, sado-masochistic practices and achieving an orgasm. It is up to the player to provide the rough sex that gives her the "energy" to win the game. (7)

By contrast TOKI always lurks on the threshold of becoming an ideal receptacle of male desire, engaged in a process of self-fashioning that seems finally indifferent to the wishes of the spectator lurking before the installation. Her shiftiness and eccentricity to the discourse that fuels her drive to be transformed

evokes the sly civility of a colonial subject. As the post-colonial theorist Homi Bhabha has argued, the colonial power requires that the colonial subject make his or herself into a recognizable other, as "a subject of difference that is almost the same but not quite." (8) Through a number of carefully realized strategies of visualization and sound, TOKI becomes the conduit through which to expose the western ideal as artificial and arbitrary.

First there is the strategy of hyperbole. TOKI is rendered as a "living and breathing" abstraction, a figure that strives to embody the western ideal of beauty, and a figure that falls far short of the ideals of photorealism that drive the mainstream developers of digibodies. TOKI's smooth, endlessly undulating skin shows no hair, wrinkles, or realistic pigmentation of eyes and skin--the very details that mainstream animators see as crucial to an impression of "aliveness." Recalling and reversing the trajectory of the liquid-silver cyborg killer in *Terminator 2: Judgement Day* (1991, by James Cameron), TOKI refuses to be embodied in "real" flesh, revealing only as an outline what is usually represented as a natural process of incarnation. By projecting only a perfunctory obedience to western dreams, TOKI renegotiates the meaning of conformity into a space of difference and disturbance.

TOKI is a figure of puns. A pun is a figure of speech that announces one thing as given and is potentially another thing. TOKI is the Korean word for rabbit but it also refers to the Playboy Bunny--TOKI's ears are aligned with westernized images of beauties wearing false rabbit ears. This hint that western beauty standards are colonizing Korean ideas of beauty executes a pun on traditional Korean imagery. The Rabbit in Korean folk culture is associated with the Moon--a symbol for woman and for the menstrual cycle. Traditionally, the Rabbit is shown inside the orb of the new Moon, busily washing and cleaning, the vocation of the ideal traditional Korean housewife. Released from her domestic

burdens and not burdened by childbearing, TOKI has turned the energy and exacting standards once thought to define woman's place in the home into a process of fashioning her body as a desirable object.

TOKI is always a statement that is unfinished. Passive acceptance is never depicted by Lee as a state of harmony nor even accomplishment. The perfecting of TOKI is a kind of automatic gender writing. A compulsively iterative stylus is visualized by Lee as compulsively drawing, erasing, and redrawing her torso, breasts, lips, and vagina--a kind of obsessive visual copulation that makes a spectacle of the mechanic architecture, the rigging, beneath the surface of her hyper-realized skin.

Even as TOKI approaches a perfect incarnation of the western beauty standard, the words she utters and the brooding and ominous soundscape in which she is imprisoned evokes a harsh industrial process far from the reassurances of femininity as nature. In the installation "Lash" (part of the "Powder Room" installation at the Gus Fisher Gallery in Auckland, New Zealand, in 2005), a blink of the eye is sounded as the crack of a whip, uniting the sign of an invitation with the sound of an instrument of torture and slavery. In the digital animation *Super Toy* (2005), her strident vocalizations--"deeper," "harder"--turn compliance into a demand, passivity into challenge.

Finally, TOKI's fixed and childlike face, with its bee-sting red lips, is less the epicentre of the "soul" than a mechanism wearing a mask. So for example, in "Powder Room" the spectator is confronted with four identical TOKI clones, each posing in a different way before a mirror. One stands as if staring through a two-way mirror onto a private "female" space. But if the installation suggests that women anticipate being the object of an external gaze, the presence of the same image, behaving asynchronously, suggests that it is the spectator who

must choose to forget that what is presented is an impersonal process. In this manner, getting personal with TOKI is only accomplished by the denial of impersonality in the exchange, like a hooker and client.

Through these strategies and in acquiescing to the hyper-sexualization of her body, TOKI refuses to be a passive surface or the cybernetic equivalent of a "comfort woman." Her refusal announces that once the demands of sexual perfection are set in motion they will become all encompassing, engulfing he who imagines women as the accommodating ciphers of his own sexual desires.

TOKI AS PHANTASM

But what kind of being is TOKI? At first sight she is a fantasy object, a pivot for sexism. But this idea of simple reflection is undermined by the visual and audio renderings, the puns and parody that Lee reveals as indigenous to TOKI's creation. If TOKI is a male fantasy then that fantasy is presented in a form that mimics male desire, even as it reveals new forms of being and new contours of desire.

TOKI is a phantasm rather than a figure of fantasy. As defined by the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze, a phantasm is an illegitimate copy, a simulation that assumes a surface resemblance to its immediate model in order to establish by subterfuge its own singular reality. (9) In mimicking a thing it is not, and in so doing revealing that it is only apparently the same, the phantasm unsettles the process of resemblance itself. What is the vocation of TOKI but to unravel the logic of the specified--of existing as a mere reflex of a sexual category--by creating a specific individual? And what is this individual but a creature impelled by the burden of cliché and a deliberately contrived cartoon literalism to seek to be singular?

Such is the fascination of TOKI. She presents male fantasies in a state of mimicry, assuming the image forms of the westernized regimes of colonialism and sexism in order to unravel them. A figure that warps and folds through a

series of identifications never quite encompassed or fulfilled by any image, doomed to endless repetition, TOKI recalls from her advertised servitude the image of the nomad, a being always in a process of becoming something else and never at home in one place, even in her virtual body. (10) The spectator viewing her antics is likely to be reminded of his or her complicity in the great structures of sexism and colonialism. As TOKI slips away from what she seems to so willingly embody, might not the spectator feel a moment of disturbance, of eccentricity and of slipperiness within relation to what is collectively defined by the media as the essential sexy reference points of being?

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NOTES

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3. Taeyon Kim, "Neo–Confucian Body Techniques in Korea's Consumer Society," *Body and Society*, Volume 9, no. 2 (June 2003), 97–113.
4. Statistic from KoreaMediaWatch@groups.msn.com, accessed August 4, 2005. The dynamics are not purely cultural, however. As the vast trade in global sex indicates, women are forced into prostitution as a means of supporting themselves and /or their families or to find a way out of the oppressive conditions of the sweatshop. Whatever the particularities of the case, the general rule applies: close a factory and prostitution increases.
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9. Gilles Deleuze, "Plato and Simulacrum," *October*, Volume 127 (Winter 1983), 45–56.

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