



Eli Cortiñas: The Ethics of Montage

Eli Cortiñas has the incisiveness and humor of the Dadaist legacy and a profound eye for identity politics and contemporary art history, making her work a veritable combination of avant-gardes: early 20th century photomontage, 1970s photo-conceptualism, feminism, and queer theory. This has been true throughout her career, but it is especially relevant in her most recent project *The most given of givens* (2016) – a presentation in three channels with found documentary footage, images shot on location, and clips from the racist fantasies of the golden age of Hollywood. The video opens with the disembodied voice characteristic of documentary film that claims, “When men die, they enter into history. When statues die, they enter into art. This botany of death is what we call culture.” This appropriation of Chris Marker’s and Alain Resnais’s *Les statues meurent aussi* (1953), which was censored by the French state for its criticism of colonialism, creates a sense of extraordinary anxiety that only intensifies with Cortiñas’s self-aware melodrama. We then transition to scenes of European actors walking among projected footage of African peoples – all set to a disembodied drum that enacts a distancing of time and space, as if it is a sonic watch that cannot truly tell time. Interspersed with scenes from classical Hollywood Tarzan films is footage shot by Cortiñas in Athens, London, and Patagonia, which engenders a historical connectivity that reveals the ills of the past to be ever-present and ready to erupt at any moment.

Cortiñas has been rewriting these narrative and formal concerns – especially with regard to postcolonialism, sexuality, and gender – throughout her career. In fact, *The most given of givens* makes us think differently about the entire course of video art after 1960. The project of postmodernism was meant by its foundational theorists to open up the discourse on the humanities to the diversity of human experience. Video and photography have been largely heralded as the receptacles of this postmodern vision, considering the rise of conceptual artists using photography who have also dealt with identity politics, from Lynn Hershman Leeson and Laurie Anderson to Sherrie Levine and Laurie Simmons.

Waldburger Wouters

Rue de la Régence 67 Regentschapstraat, 1000 Brussels
www.waldburgerwouters.com, info@waldburgerwouters.com

The limiting fact of the discussion of “postmodern” art is that most historians and critics focus on activist subject matter, rather than activist forms or formalisms. This is where Cortiñas makes her undeniable mark. Her imagery and intent are certainly feminist, but she also illustrates the structural elements of gender politics that are intertwined with her chosen media, “I have been devoted for ten years to investigating the female archetype. I have been deeply involved with the codes of representation of female archetypes in cinema and my goal is to re-write their personas to give them a deeper psychological dimension.”¹ She thereby combines an interest in archetypes with the formal/compositional conventions that produce those archetypes; as she says, she is focused on *codes*, that is, *how* things are represented, not just *what* is represented.

Postcolonial theory, which has been central to Cortiñas’s work, attempts to rectify these issues of activism and representation, but it has not been fully integrated into art history, perhaps because of the inherent racism of the humanities. Art history has resisted any form of postcolonial critique other than a superficial nod to postcolonial subject matter. The formal tools of the discipline have remained unchanged. For instance, as a result of their immersion in early 20th century colonial/ethnographic photography and human zoos in Western Europe, photomontage and collage – at the level of cutting and reassembling – are extensions of the colonialist project. As I have argued with regard to the work of Martha Rosler, this means that Dada, a foundational movement in the history of art, is at its core embroiled in a racist imaginary.²

The situation is complex, because it deals with the intersectional beauty of gender, race, and sexuality, with none taking precedence over the other (another characteristic of Cortiñas’s work). Luce Irigaray contends in *The Speculum of the Other Woman*, “We can assume that any theory of the subject has always been appropriated by the ‘masculine.’ When she submits to (such a) theory, woman fails to realize that she is renouncing the specificity of her own relationship to the imaginary,” and it exactly this disjointed relationship to representation that Dada exhumes in its syntactical de-structuring and re-structuring of established forms of imagery.³ Cortiñas, however, takes this Continental vision of feminism a step further by insisting that we understand gender relations within the wider context of racism, forced migration, and enslavement.

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Skype conversation with the artist, 26 February 2016.

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See Simmons, William J. and Martha Rosler, “Portfolio by Martha Rosler.” *BOMB Magazine* 22 April 2016. <http://bombmagazine.org/article/7323329/portfolio>

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Irigaray, Luce. *Speculum of the Other Woman* [Speculum de L'Autre Femme]. Translated by Gillian Gill. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985. 133.

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Rue de la Régence 67 Regentschapsstraat, 1000 Brussels
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In this vein, the cultural anthropologist Elizabeth Povinelli theorizes postcolonialism as a discourse that can be understood in terms of “carnality: the socially built space between flesh and environment” that exists in an increasingly complex colonial dance.⁴ Povinelli goes on to point out that “flesh and discourse are the literal material of each other, different from each other but mutually obliged rather than caused or affected...”⁵ Nowhere is this clearer than in *The most given of givens*. Cortiñas reveals montage to be a form of flesh, wherein we can see the interwoven bodies/images that have resulted in the neocolonial patterns of the present. After all, the African continent was a sort of skin or screen for the projection and branding (literally and figuratively) of the European imaginary. This is the truth of skin; it can break down and fall prey to abuse, but it regenerates, and each segment of the body is inherently inflected by its connection via flesh to the rest of human topography. Cortiñas requires not only a revised art history but also a revised ethnography, one that looks inward rather than outward, one that sees cultures as neither commensurate nor oppositional.

William J. Simmons

New York, October 2016

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Povinelli, Elizabeth A. *The Empire of Love*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006. 7.

5

Ibid. 9

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www.waldburgerwouters.com, info@waldburgerwouters.com