

# Surplus Bodies

## The Real, The Virtual and the Work of Witkin

Virtual Reality: the place where flesh goes to die and the electronic body struggles to be born at the fin-de-millennium...<sup>1</sup>

In this essay I want to think about the fascination contemporary culture, particularly photography, has with the visceral and virtual body. The body is now in a very real sense 'hot' property. No longer marginal it lies at the very centre of scientific and cultural discourse and political and ethical debate. Kroker and Weinstein's definition of VR (cited above) as a transitional space might be as good a place as any from which to consider the current status of the human body and technology. New technologies, that is optoelectronics and their application in science and culture, which increasingly becomes a merging field, raise fundamental questions about who we are, and how our world might be. The body is, along with cyberspace, perceived as a final frontier and increasingly what the body is will depend on how it is represented; on how it is understood; on how we negotiate meaning.<sup>2</sup> This means not just thinking about how we are positioned by discourse, but how we might position ourselves within discourse.<sup>3</sup> It means taking responsibility for the knowledge we produce. Moreover, if we are to provide knowledge adequate to the demands of the present then it is in the here and now that we should begin.

Current discourses about the body and technology are for the most part fetishistic and reductionist accounts of the present; it is not accidental that biological essentialism has been superseded by a facile genetic essentialism which is rarely questioned. Similarly, visual work that takes as its subject 'the body' is on the whole assumed to be politically progressive. I am as wary of this as I am of the critical or historical writing that accompanies the exhibition and publication of such images. This is to say that within postmodernism such questions are repressed. However, they are important if we are to make some sense of the ways in which responses to what are called 'new' (although more accurately not so new technologies) run simultaneously in opposite directions: a projection into the future and a regression to the past.

Few would dispute that we live in a period of rapid social change which has produced a crisis in the real; in representation. If the present seems 'out of control' one assumption is that if we are not in control of the present, then at least in employing the latest electronic technology we can be involved in directing the future. We can be masters of a virtual universe. This is a question of power. It is the mark of a lack of political imagination and a naive faith in the emancipatory qualities of technology that computers have been seized upon as if a postmodern life-raft, a Star-ship Enterprise to beam us out of the present. Within the realm of visual culture a long-discredited essentialism of political commitment has been resurrected arguing yet again that in the right hands, if the right people are wired, freedom is just around the corner.

At the very same moment there has been a plea for a return to the past, to a craft-based master photography as if we can escape from the present through a naive, nostalgic and regressive return to the authentic experience of the photographer-as-sovereign-author working in a pre-postmodern garden before the Fall. These positions are two sides of the same coin. Both are marked by 'nostalgia' whether for future or past. Both share in common the desire to transcend the present by swiftly dispatching all those tiresome economic, political, philosophical and ethical questions that haunt our times, which we seem unable to think about, let alone answer. In this essay I want to explore the ways in which our present postmodern culture is

haunted not just by fantasies about the future, but by pre-modern, that is medieval beliefs. I take as my examples medical imaging and art photography. While bodies and technologies have no origins, they do have histories and these need to be traced.

I want to argue that what is repressed in medical imaging returns in the realm of contemporary art. As medical imaging has become more abstract, less meaty, art has become more visceral; more bodily. The techno-futuristic realm of medical imaging provides a framework in which to consider the photographic images of Joel-Peter Witkin. The first epitomises a nostalgia for the future and the latter a yearning for the past. Both are characteristic of post-modernism. Witkin (and many others) exercise tight authorial control. It would, for example, be impossible for the critique that follows to appear alongside his photographs. This is undoubtedly a form of censorship. I primarily focus upon his work and his use of cadavers and body parts as a means to discuss what is a more general trend within the art market. Broadly, the arguments presented here could be applied to other artists such as Hirst or Serrano; to recent publication of photographs from medical and police archives or to artists' illegal acquisition of body parts from morgues in order to make work. Witkin's work is only distinguished by its extremity. Whatever way you look at it there is a market, a trade in bodies and they are not virtual.

This might tell us something about the present popular fascination with medical images of the human body. Medical images, especially abstract images produced by such methods as photomicrography or radiography have largely been ignored by historians of photography. Where they are used by historians of medicine, these images are usually treated as unproblematic illustration. These images have been located in archives; their authors are usually anonymous; access is restricted. Recently, however, computer generated medical imagery has become widely circulated to a keen viewing public. Ultrasound, magnetic resonance imaging, tomography are remote technologies with a history rooted in techno-military warfare. The images they produce are seductive and because they offer us so much to see, we marvel at their beauty and so tend to overlook what has been excised. On closer inspection we begin to notice that all traces of bodily disorder, mess, chaos are removed. The desire here is for clean-cut, flattened, soft, seamless imagery. The result is a highly sanitised, orderly vision of the body. A simulated depth is complemented by, which is to say aestheticised by, the use of electronically generated colour, providing an almost hallucinogenic quality. Moreover, vessel, cell or gene is isolated from its ground so that the object in view seems to float alone in space and allows our eye only to focus on this or that element as if totally unrelated to the body. Flesh is reduced to abstract information. It is no longer that the body is fragmented but rather it is dematerialised (technologies such as x-ray and electron microscope played an important role here) and finally disappears, as if the visceral is what we most fear. We could describe this as a kind of postmodern flaying where we are now eager participants in such disciplinary processes and therefore medical images once circulated to a private audience can now be safely shown publicly. They appear in everyday culture as a display of power, not of humans but of intelligent machines. It is the body that becomes a ghost while its pictures are living, teeming with life, even after death.

This more anonymous context is important to an understanding of Witkin's work. He argues that he wants his prints to "look like old photographs that

have been hidden in someone's attic and suddenly brought to light".<sup>4</sup> To this end he employs formal theatrical props of nineteenth century photography: the proscenium arch; the use of the curtain, the fetishistic techniques of a dark photographic and fine art printing. The space within the frame is compressed, congested with detail, depthless. This is further emphasised by the use of collaged backdrops. In neo-medieval, or neo-neo-classical spectacle, he conjures up the spectres of Dürer or David, as if to flatter the viewer's art historical knowledge, but also to make us intelligent consumers of what has already been consumed.

This formal ordering is combined with a grotesque content of sutured foetuses, stumps and cadavers in various states of decay thus producing a powerful mingling of the aesthetic and the medical which verges on the pornographic. What once coalesced on the anatomy table, now congeals in the bloody tableaux created in Witkin's studio. This work has a history in anatomical dissection (a more adult version of infantile sadism), religious iconography (with its simultaneous elevation and degradation of women), and pornography (the body as meat). But it is a history of which Witkin cannot speak. Such a history can, however, be traced in wax Venuses of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The pose of these female dolls closely resembles that of swooning saints, as well as the standardised pose of pornographic models. Laid out on velvet, satin or silk, like toys they could be opened up and the viewer could see the mysterious organs of the interior, particularly reproductive. For Witkin, the past, like the body can be cut just how one wants. Witkin is also an editor of privately printed books: *Masterpieces of Medical Photography*, 1987; *Gods of Heaven and Earth*, 1989; *Harm's Way*, 1994. In a process of representational asset-stripping, images are wrenched from archives of police, medicine, asylums. Re-assembled and re-contextualised they are beautifully re-printed on matt art paper, bound in cloth and produced in 'limited' editions of 5,000. Witkin is keen to display his academic credentials and commissions scientists, art historians, medics to write essays which lend a specious credibility to his art. Those who had remained below the threshold of vision until the nineteenth century; those classified as 'other' were brought into view so that they could be made to disappear into 'ignoble' archives in what was an act of representational liquidation. Here they are resurrected. What was once tragedy becomes farce. The dead or merely different return not as subjects in their own right, but only as so much grist to the mill of art.

Witkin's preferred technique is to gouge, lacerate, scratch the negatives; the prints are then toned, death is warmed up, faux-foxed, spattered with potassium cyanide, which gives the appearance of decay. The result is a stained and abused image. It shares this distinguishing mark with the pornographic image. Finally, with the use of encaustic the prints are redemptively polished in a bogus act of reparation and sanctification.<sup>5</sup> This simulates the fate of bodies. Witkin becomes a kind of textual anatomist. The skin of the photographic emulsion stands as metaphor for human skin. Bodies once wounded, bound, masked or gagged, are finally killed and chopped up like so many pieces of meat.<sup>6</sup> This is a metaphoric and literal scavenging; a cannibalisation of styles and bodies; a chilling universe in which bodies are collapsed into texts; reality into fantasy.

But bodies are not texts; aesthetics are not ethics any more than virtuality is reality. The bodies and cadavers come from the geographical margins and the recently deregulated markets of eastern block coun-

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continued

tries which have recently become a sort of playground for Western artists.<sup>7</sup> Bodies become commodities, articles of trade, like any other. They are easy to come by for those with money and power. These bodies, cadavers or human remains, alive or dead, are objects with one last value which can be bought whole or in part. There is a trade in bodies, whereby the poor, while still alive, are forced to sell their organs, their bodies, their children, sometimes their lives. What Witkin produces is a system of representation that reinforces the mercenary logic of a global market economy which is little more than a form of corporate feudalism.

The lie of voyeurism is, of course, that the object agrees to its exhibition. These 'other' surplus bodies, with heads laterally or literally severed can't look back. Those who were once subjects become objects, and in an act of subjugation are made to bear the burden, the sheer material weight of corporeality and finally death so that the artist, and the viewer, can have eternal life.<sup>8</sup> In the killing fields of central Europe, or central America, maiming, torture and death are all too close to home and so we prefer our corpses, like history, dressed up.

This is the final irony: Witkin's world is a universe where all boundaries are gone and yet such a world can only exist in one of the most hidebound of institutions: the art gallery, which in the late twentieth century is little more than a showroom for the art market. This market is one with a voracious appetite for indelicacies. The 'waning of affect' as we approach the end of the millennium has led to an increased and as yet unsatisfied demand for butchered bodies and strong meat, so long as it is well hung. We should be more critical.

## Roberta McGrath

### notes

1 A Kroker and M Weinstein, *Data Trash*, 1994, p162

2 See D Haraway, 'A Manifesto for Cyborgs', *Socialist Review*, no. 80, 1985; R Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects*, 1994

3 See S Hall, 'Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation', *Framework*, no. 36, 1989

4 Interview, *Border Crossings*, Winter 1990, p17

5 It is Witkin's wife who carries out this last rite.

6 Witkin is keen to emphasise that he does not tamper with the bodies, as if the process of choice of object is not part of the process of making work.

7 Witkin claims his 'moral and ethical stringency' in obtaining access to bodies. Permission, where it cannot be agreed by the person because of reasons of insanity or death is always sought and agreed by doctors as 'representatives of the State'. J-P Witkin, public lecture, Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh, October 1995. These are bodies which no one has claimed; *Head of a Dead Man* was a victim of police brutality in Mexico City. More recent pictures are of asylum inmates in Budapest, Hungary. This exhibits a truly remarkable lack of moral judgement and artistic responsibility.

8 '[T]ruthfully they are aspects of my own self', *Journal of Contemporary Art*, op. cit.

p112. There is a world of difference between trying to understand the self as other and the narcissism of viewing others as part of oneself.