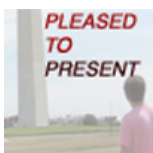


june/july
vol 6 issue 5

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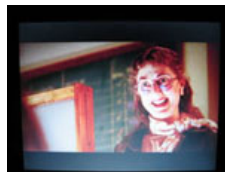
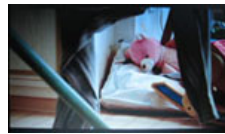
Blogs



going viral

Cindy Sherman's *Office Killer*

by Dahlia Schweitzer



In 1997, Cindy Sherman's film *Office Killer* articulated the anxieties of contamination and alienation at the end of the 20th century, as social and technological change started to render us alone and afraid, even if empowered. Now, more than 15 years later, in a world of blurred boundaries, globalization and Facebook, with contagions lurking at every turn, physical isolation has never been as ubiquitous while technology claims to be more unifying than ever.

Sherman's singular foray into filmmaking is being screened as part of the artist's retrospective at MOMA, February 26-June 11, 2012. What can it tell contemporary audiences about our increasing paranoia of disease and infection?

The immune system, and its apparent collapse, has become a metaphor for boundaries between our private and public selves, between our bodies and the increasingly hostile world around us. At the time of Sherman's film, AIDS was the most available metaphor to describe the technological threats to our bodies and our identities. With incredible synchronicity, the explosion of computers into personal and professional spheres occurred at the same time AIDS was saturating our consciousness. Our isolation through technology couldn't have come a moment too soon.

While AIDS directly threatens our ability to protect our own bodies from disease and death, altering not only our relationship to our bodies but our relationship to other people's bodies, technology threatens our ability to maintain a physical presence in the workplace by eliminating the need for jobs to be done by humans and urging us to work and communicate remotely. The 1990s established this pronounced shift in social interaction that has only become more entrenched in the 21st century. AIDS and technology both made people vanish, and, people have continued to disappear.

Office Killer encapsulated all these issues, foreshadowing what lay ahead. Visually and metaphorically, the film represents a culture that began in the 1990s, of being homebound at an inappropriate age, fighting to slow down body decomposition, and the increasing awareness of the contagions that must be kept at bay.

The film opens with a mail cart moving around the office of *Constant Consumer* magazine, the items inside it passed around like germs, giving new meaning to the concept of viral transmission. There are constant references to the circulation of materials as articles move from one desk to another, emails from one computer to another, all mimicking the path of "Gary's cold." He is the staff slut, the Lothario who is also *Constant Consumer's* head writer. Since viral transmission is a type of communication, the most important factor in the "success" of any virus is linked to the spread of its organisms. We can trace the route of "Gary's cold" by its remnants, which are everywhere: the pills on Gary's desk, the Echinacea on Virginia's desk, and Norah's stuffy nose. As Norah, the magazine's manager, passes out pink slips with a dirty tissue clenched in her hand, the link is clear. Downsizing, like a virus, can be

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deadly, and the pink slips are little notices of doom indicating the metaphorical equivalent of a positive or negative test result. The office has clearly been infected.

The virulent nature of the cold is further solidified when Dorine, our lowly and awkward copywriter, finally reads her pink slip. She looks it over absentmindedly at first, not realizing the gravity of the situation, as she changes the copier's toner. The downsizing has caused a significant slippage in both the magazine and Dorine's status quo, and as if to indicate the traumatic nature of this event, the toner explodes all over her. "It's probably toxic," Norah says, horrified, keeping her distance. We see this scene transpire from such a distance — far outside the building, peering in across the alley. It is as though Sherman herself did not want to get too close.

Dorine's face is covered with a fine black dust, but this contamination may have come with an added bonus. "Your position has been modified." Dorine is sent to work from home, her physical presence replaced with an email address. As Dorine's self is literally modified, the toner becomes the antivirus, rendering her immune to the destruction that will meet the rest of the magazine's central employees.

A common result of viruses and epidemics is that the disenfranchised gain power, and the formerly empowered become victims. One accidental result of pandemics is a transformation of the disenfranchised into superhuman, and *Office Killer* makes this clear as Dorine rises through the magazine ranks, avoiding illness to bring home to her basement laboratory the bodies of her former superiors so that they can play the roles she delegates to them.

Susan Sontag writes, "Epidemics of particularly dreaded illnesses always provoke an outcry against leniency and tolerance, now defined as laxity, weakness, disorder, corruption, unhealthiness." Viral outbreaks are routinely blamed on those who are sexually irresponsible or renegade, those seen as untrustworthy figures outside the social code, and the act of cleaning up is, therefore, left to those who are considered morally superior.

In *Office Killer*, Dorine is the enforcer of the moral code, acting as her own kind of deadly virus in order to impose reorganization upon *Constant Consumer* magazine. Norah, as the manager embezzling funds and downsizing employees, Gary Michaels as the staff lecher, and Mail Boy, who paws through naughty magazines and flirts his way through the office, all meet Dorine's wrath. Even though the Mail Boy's role in the film seems minor, his death is the most bloody, rendering his crimes the most toxic, or, at least, the most explicit, and it is with his death that we clearly see Dorine's opinion of him. In her book, *Illness as Metaphor*, Susan Sontag argues that, in today's paranoid universe, "fear of sexuality is the new disease-sponsored register." The gash on the Mail Boy's throat leaks blood across the floor, the dangers of his sexual promiscuity, combined with the transmissive qualities of his profession, made visual as his body is carried out to the parking lot in the big mail bin, as if he, too, were going out with the mail.

During the 1990s, technological developments and AIDS coincided with shifts in the workplace. No one knew where anyone belonged anymore. They stopped talking to each other in person. Communication became abstract and anonymous. A pervasive sense of isolation began to spread, exacerbated by a growing realization of the vulnerability of human boundaries to contagion and contamination. [Email reigned supreme. Now, one could argue, it is Facebook, which redraws the social web interrupted by contagion fears, and creates a new type of family tree without relying on blood linkages.]

Because she can't cope with the new reality of the office, with the downsizing and the bad behavior, Dorine re-creates the family tableau as the ideal workplace, but on her own terms. She makes her own fantasy version of the office in her basement, one where she is in total control. "This is just like old times," she tells the dead bodies as they snuggle on the couch in front of the flickering TV screen. "I put mother to bed early so we can stay up as late as we want." She's created a situation she produces and maintains.

Unlike Cindy Sherman's solitary photographs, there are multiple characters in *Office Killer*, but it is still a small group, strangely disassociated from any larger world and disassociated from itself. Not only is there minimal physical contact in the movie, at least between living beings, but every setting is as claustrophobic as a Sherman photograph. There are very few establishing shots in *Office Killer* and no sense of the outdoors. This is a world where the walls are closing in, and the characters cannot connect with each other on any real level, bodies seeping and dripping but never merging delete). For Sherman, in both *Office Killer* and her photographs, there is a curiosity about lack of intimacy. Her figures are always solitary, but also come from an isolation that stems from her treatment of the body as if it were a doll. With the presentation of the body as a doll, she eradicates inter-personal relationships, while maintaining total control — self-control over her own body and control over the bodies of those around her. In other series, Sherman is even isolated from herself, a puppeteer of her own limbs and expressions.

In the 21st century, much like in the mid-'90s, there is a natural reluctance to touch or be touched, exacerbated by our heightened awareness of contagions [from the common cold, to head lice, to SARS.] Appropriately, more and more of us do keep our distance, encouraged by a sexual depression that started with AIDS but which has been further enabled by technology. A reduction in middle class promiscuity, writes Sontag, has been matched with "a growth of the ideal of monogamy, of a prudent sexual life" and a "waning of sexual spontaneity." Our sex lives have been replaced with the Internet, which permits intimacy without the exchange of dangerous bodily fluids.

Where bodies once were, there are now computers and machines. Abandoning our bodies seems natural when we look at how fallible they are. The staff of *Constant Consumer* magazine is full of physical vulnerabilities. No one's body (other than Dorine's) is strong enough to withstand anything, from colds to decomposition. Even the vocabulary of the office is one of death and dying. "Get out there and drop the axe," Virginia tells Norah. "The laws of economics threaten to downsize us," the opening voiceover tells us. "If you can't keep up, you will be terminated." Dropped axes, downsizing (literally sizing down, flattening), termination — this isn't the language of a gentle cultural shift. This is the language of massacre.

Disappearing into technology, into the avatars and icons on our Facebook pages, can have positive consequences. It did for Dorine; unencumbered by her body, soon finds freedom behind her computer screen. Technology can empower, allowing Dorine to come into her own, gaining strength and confidence, her human awkwardness gradually disappearing.

At the end of the film, the bespectacled and frumpy Dorine leaves the deteriorating bodies of her formerly attractive co-workers and drives off to a new life, her fresh glamorous persona evident in the rear view mirror. The transformation is complete. Her house, the laboratory, is left burning behind her—fire is the best way to eradicate germs, destroy contaminated bodies, [and take care of the mortgage.]

See *Cindy Sherman at MoMA through June 11, 2012*, moma.org

1Heather Schell, 'Outburst! A Chilling True Story about Emerging-Virus Narratives and Pandemic Social Change,' *Configurations*, 5.1 (1997). 125.

2Sontag, Susan. *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and its Metaphors*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001. 168.

3Bill Albertini, 'Contagion and the Necessary Accident', *Discourse*, 30.3 (2008). 443-467.

4Sontag 161.

5Sontag 166, 167.

runway animation

Ruth Hogben's Kaleidoscopic Fashion Photography

By Ezrha Jean Black



It took a long time for art photography, much less the art world's critical establishment, to let fashion photography in the front door, so to speak. More recently still, the art world has admitted couture itself into the inner sanctum. Art collectives and partnerships have also undercut fine art's traditional emphasis on unique authorship. Decades after the first collaborations between artists and engineers, after Duchamp invited the audience in on the ground floor, we finally get that it's all pretty much collaborative on one level or another.

Ruth Hogben is hardly waiting for an art world imprimatur. She's far too busy constructing a digitally enhanced architecture and choreography to visually articulate, perform and elaborate the sculptural and spatial values of the designer couture and the movement of human bodies wearing it that constitute her principal subject. It's a cinematography transformed into choreography—of light, space and physical elements. Hogben's films frequently have a look of boldly graphic and abstract animation — a kaleidoscopic fugue of architectural elements. As the animations unfurl, the 'kaleidoscopic' bits congeal into recognizable physical elements and human forms, and the couture takes shape over the model's body, only to immediately commence a metamorphosis projecting both body and garment in every conceivable direction and configuration. The figure pivots in the visual field to both articulate the couture from every angle and play out the possibilities for movement within its "architecture." Hogben shows us not merely the 'look' — our first take-away from a couture design show—but the performance of the garment, and conceivably the body wearing it. But there is nothing mechanical about this demonstration. Instead, the intersection of model and garment becomes an essay for Hogben's (and the viewer's) imagination, an opportunity to dream human extensions forward into space—architecture, flight—or backward, more introspectively, towards a speculative metamorphosis.

Hogben has been fortunate in finding collaborators well matched to her sensibility, principally the Scots designer, Gareth Pugh, the protégé of Rick Owens and Michèle Lamy, now based in Paris; and she would probably give Pugh a great deal of credit for her success. But Hogben comes to this partnership (and others, including Riccardo Tisci of Givenchy and Phoebe Philo of Céline) with her own bona fides, having first made her mark under Nick Knight with the celebrated production design of Alexander McQueen's last couture show, a design that morphed an abstract, thematic film backdrop with a two-camera real-time interactive video loop of the room — models, clothes and details, and audience — counterpointing the runway show.

Hogben has also acknowledged the influence of photographers like Man Ray. But, setting aside the very specific influences of her mentors and collaborators, Knight and Pugh, the stormy chiaroscuro, distortions of the visual field, the body as vehicle for abstraction (if not architecture) —all reflect an influence far closer to home. Whether acknowledged or not, the shadow of English photographer Bill

Brandt looms large over Hogben's own 'landscaping' of the body. Interestingly, Brandt apprenticed in Man Ray's Paris studio. More interesting still is that Bill Brandt was not a fashion photographer, nor is there any element or quality in his photographs resembling the conventional glamour of fashion photography—although it could be argued that the surreal drama of some of his photographs is itself a kind of glamour.

What sets Hogben apart from both her mentors and collaborators is her vigorous rejection of the fixed pose, the posturing, signals, gestures and conventions of glamour photography that appear in almost all commercial fashion photography and films. The pose is never fixed but constantly shifting, if not physically, then digitally, and to the verge of distortion. Hogben's films show us how superfluous such notions usually are. Who, after all, really needs to be flattered here? We're looking at the clothes, the shapes, the body and person wearing them. That's it.

The motion itself isn't new. We've seen it (or its suggestion) in fashion photography since Avedon and probably before. What's new is the movement itself. There's more than an inkling of this in Knight's own work, and he definitely set Hogben on course; but this is her own achievement. The movement, as Loïe Fuller vividly demonstrated more than a century ago, is glamour enough. In Hogben's work, each moment, each frame is a fresh reveal, conveying a complex geometry and drama, what in two dimensions can take on the aspect of a Chinese character or Rohrschach blot, or, projected in the mind's eye, an architecture. A promotion Hogben made with Pugh for the cosmetic line, MAC, provides a good thumbnail illustration of her approach.

Hogben is obviously serious about the materials — literally the fabric of her films; but there's nothing clinical about it. She understands seduction—not so plain, not so simple. (Consider the film she did in 2011 for Ungaro.) Fuck art—let's dance.