Dawn Woolley, 2010.

Visual Pleasure: Photography, Illusion and the Desire to be Deceived

All of the artwork I have created over the last ten years has contained two unifying features; the use of photographic cut-out's and the use of my body. Both elements invoke philosophical questions about perception, interpretation and semiotics. The body of work printed in this book forms an enquiry into the act of looking, and the experiences we have as individuals when we are looked at. Both acts contain elements of construction; information that is created mentally rather than viewed by the eye and the codes of cultural viewing that idealise bodies and mould behaviours. There is always a disjuncture between the actual object and the object of our perception. This essay explores the artificiality of the way we see and the things we are shown. Consideration is given to the importance of the body, not only as an object of sight and a cultural signifier, but also as the vessel through which we negotiate the world and gather our perceptions of it.

Throughout the middle ages philosophers considered the human subject in terms of two separate components - the body and the mind. Cartesian dualism decreed that vision inhabits consciousness and is given privilege over our tactile, bodily sensations. The body was only a container of consciousness – a vessel to transport the mind. In the early twentieth century phenomenologists challenged this viewpoint, arguing that consciousness is not distinct from the body, but is created in it through touch, taste, smell, sound and sight. Rather than endow visual perception with a greater truth, they argued that vision alone was inadequate to understand the world. This is the philosophical viewpoint that I will go on to describe in relation to my artwork.

It is our proximity to the physical world that allows us to make sense of our visual perceptions. As children we used our hands to learn how a shape felt, and then memorized the visual pattern that corresponded to the tactile sensation. We used memory and knowledge to invest new two-dimensional information with three-dimensional attributes based on their similarity to the shapes we have learnt about previously. Even if we had never held an apple before we first looked at a photograph of one, we would be able to assign certain attributes to it that we had learned to

associate with the general idea of spherical objects through our previous tactile investigations. Inversely, if we hadn't already had an experience of holding a round object we would not be able to invest the apple with the correct three-dimensional form – we might imagine that it was flat or conical because our minds would not be able to fill in the information that was missing from the photograph. The side of the apple that was not revealed to the lens would be a void in the mind.

We have to know an object physically before we are able to recognize it visually. Long before phenomenological philosophy, the empiricists were aware that visual information could be misconstrued if it was not corroborated by other types of information. They made the distinction between two types of objects – the visible object and the tangible object. The tangible object was something that could be measured and described in terms of those measurements – it had length, height, weight and density that did not change (or changed in a way that could also be measured, such as water turning into ice at 0°). Through experimentation and a corporeal propinquity to the object an agreed truth about its characteristics could be achieved. The visible object, however, was not to be trusted; it could alter its appearance and deceive. In 1709 George Berkeley published his *Essay towards a New Theory of Vision*, in which he described how a tangible object is always the same size and shape no matter where it is in relation to the observer – its dimensions remain the same even if the object is very close or at a great distance from the subject. But the visible object changes as you walk towards it or around it – it is not fixed to one visual form and cannot be measured because its shape and dimensions constantly transform.[1]

In my artwork the cut-out is literally a visible object. From the angle that I photograph it, it appears to be a woman (*The Substitute* series), but if the viewer were able to change their position in relation to the cut-out, its dimensions would alter dramatically. It would transform from a life-sized human being into an abstract, 2-dimensional object that doesn't signify a body at all. But the viewer isn't able to move around the cut-out; because he or she is given the correct visual information to lead the brain to the hypothesis of 'human being' they invest the visible object with the

attributes of the tangible object. The perspective of the camera withholds any information that would counter this assumption.

The camera also defines the distance between the viewer and the cut-out. In some of the artwork the cut-out is in the foreground of the image, making its material qualities easier to discern and more tangible to the viewer. The cut-outs are at their most convincing when there is a considerable distance between the camera/viewer and the object. All tangible access to the cut-out is denied by the distance. The viewer makes his or her interpretation from indistinct visual information that indicates a human form rather than substantial information that indicates a photographic copy.

Misinterpretations of visual information are possible because the information gathered in the eye is extremely limited; the vision we have of reality is largely created in the mind. According to Richard Gregory, a Professor in Neuropsychology, the amount of available information collected in the retina is likened to looking up at the night sky and only seeing an area the size of the moon – the rest of the visual data we believe we see is not collected by the eye but filled in by the brain using knowledge and memory. "Knowledge and assumptions add so much that vision is not directly related to the eyes' images or limited by them - so quite often produces fictions".[2] To fill in the gaps in our perceptions we use "predictive-hypotheses of the external world of objects"[3] that are projected onto the visual data collected by the retina to create "our most immediate reality… so experience is but indirectly related to external reality".[4]

If there are two likely predictive hypotheses of a scenario the brain 'flips' between the two outcomes. This is most simply demonstrated by visual illusions – such as the well known image of the old woman with a large nose that transforms into a young woman in a hat.[5] We are only able to make one interpretation of the visual information at a time – if we see the old woman we are not able to see the young woman and vice versa. In my artwork I hope this flipping between readings also occurs; I want the viewer to initially hypothesize that they are looking at a body and then change the interpretation to photographic cut-out, once more detailed visual information has

been gathered. But unlike the audience of the 'old woman' illusion, the viewer of my artwork will not be able to flip back to the first reading once the cut-out has been exposed; the old woman is still present in the image when the young woman is revealed, but my body was never present in the image – the revelation of the cut-out confirms the absence of the real body. The second reading of the illusion annihilates the first reading and it can't be resurrected.

In my video piece, *Interloper,* I attempt to recreate the process of interpretation and reinterpretation that takes place as we gather visual information. Whilst watching the video, the spectator inhabits the voyeuristic view of the camera. The subject appears to be naked and is standing in a bathroom; the private nature of the location heightens the sense of intrusion and allows the woman to look at herself in a mirror, seemingly unaware that she is also the object of someone else's sight. The changing position of the camera transforms the subject from a visible object into a tangible object as the blank underside of the cut-out is revealed in the mirror. The material information that is usually hidden in my photographs is slowly revealed to the spectator and the original interpretation of the scene collapses. The implication of the visual data is reinterpreted and a new meaning is created. The spectator also undergoes a transformation from voyeur to fetishist as the naked body is revealed to be an inanimate object.

The illusion of the cut-out is exposed by the cameras proximity to it. When given a fixed viewpoint the cut-out adequately signifies a naked torso, but by physically moving around the subject the viewer is able to collect additional information and conclude the interpretation accurately.

In *The Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty suggested that although our binocular vision allows us to see three-dimensionally we are still only able to see from one view-point, and so much of the three-dimensional world is hidden from our view. He described how he looked at a lamp on a table next to a wall. Although he could only see the part of the lamp that was facing him he knew that it was a three-dimensional object because he imagined seeing the lamp from the perspective of the

table underneath it, and the wall behind it. Using his prior knowledge of three-dimensional objects he filled-in the void contained within the act of looking; "[the] completed object is translucent, being shot through from all sides by an infinite number of present scrutinies which intersect in its depths leaving nothing hidden".[6]

The world is incomplete to our eyes, and it is necessary for the brain to project information onto objects to make them appear whole. This act of projection is exemplified in the relationship between a photograph and its viewer. When we look at a photograph we are given limited visual information. The two-dimensional plane of the photograph is coded to imply the presence of three-dimensional objects, even though it could not possibly contain them. In a photograph we are given a single point perspective, like Merleau-Ponty perceiving the lamp on his table. However, if he had wanted to test his imagined lines of perception he could walk over to the lamp, pick it up and view it from all angles, confirming what his mind had fabricated. His proximity to the object enabled him to elevate the visible object to the status of the tangible object. But the photograph has no substance; it is merely a copy of the visible object. When we look at a photograph we believe in the three-dimensionality of the object, but if we tried to see the other side we would be confronted by the blank underside of the photograph. In *Interloper* the mirror behind the cut-out and the movement of the camera fill in the 'infinite number of present scrutinies' and reveal the representational void.

The Substitute series also contains this void – in some of the photographs the cut-outs are easily discernible, because the rippled edge of the paper or blank underside of the image is on display. These features function to disrupt the projected angles of perception for the viewer – the cut-out refuses to become translucent because it is so obviously two-dimensional.

Believing is Seeing

Photographic representation is usually so realistic and life-like that it is possible to forget to comprehend the material of its two-dimensional surface, and instead look straight through it to the object it implies. Representational art in any medium aims to

allow the viewer to see through the material substance of the artwork and be taken in by the illusion set before them. This isn't a modern approach to art – Pliny made reference to it in *Natural History xxxv* in the 1st Century AD. He described how two painters, Parrhasius and Zeuxis, competed against each other to create the most realistic looking painting. Zeuxis painted a picture of a bunch of grapes which was so realistic that hungry birds were tricked by the image and flew to the painting. Feeling satisfied with his work he challenged Parrhasius to open the curtain and reveal his great work. And there lay his mistake. Parrhasius had painted such a realistic depiction of a curtain that he had deceived Zeuxis, who in turn had only succeeded in deceiving dumb beasts. Zeuxis conceded defeat.[7]

We are susceptible to the power of illusions because our perception of the world is a combination of visual data and expectation. We assume that we will see the things we usually see, and if our eyes are not presented with anything which is obviously contrary to this assumption we do not look any closer. Illusions are only successful because we abbreviate the process of looking. Zeuxis expected there to be a curtain behind which Parrhasiuses masterpiece would hang until the moment he revealed it. Had it been unusual to present a painting in this way he might have looked closer and exposed the trick.

The viewer of a photograph is even more susceptible to this sort of illusion because there is an expectation that the camera is an objective recording device that renders a replica copy of the scene before the lens. Unlike a painting, the photograph intrinsically contains "the reality of its origin";[8] it is "not the *optionally* real thing to which an image or sign refers but the *necessarily* real thing which has been placed before the lens, without which there would be no photograph".[9]

It is highly likely that this will also be the assumption when people view *The Substitute* series. The figure of the cut-out and the surroundings it inhabits seem plausible enough for the viewer to look at the artwork with a perceptual shorthand and see a living person rather than an image. The general shape of the body within the image and the activities it enacts are quickly summarised by the eye and mind into a woman

engaged in an embrace. There is an assumption that the man and woman posed together before the lens, then the shutter was released and the image was recorded. In *Camera Lucida* Barthes describes photographs as "a superimposition…of reality and of the past",[10] because they don't only refer to the object they depict, they also show the moment in time when the shutter was released. Cameras may capture moments of the present but photographs are always images of the past, things that have already happened. Artworks in this book contain a montage of two separate events; the photographing of the cut-out itself and the re-photographing of the cut-out in the scene. Both the male and the female subject really posed before the lens, but not at the same time. I have created a superimposition of reality; of the past and of the past again. Because the first event merges undetected into the background of the second event, illusion of the reality of the photograph's origin is upheld in the first instance of looking. When the viewer has time to look at the image more closely the brain is able to flip from body hypothesis to cut-out hypothesis as the tell tale signs of the paper are revealed and the illusion disintegrates.

Like Parrhasius' painting of the curtain, my photographs offer the viewer a plausible version of reality. Because the image is photographic there is an expectation of a single moment of time caught on film. The action of the scene implies animation; it suggests that both figures were in motion when the shutter was released and would continue in that trajectory once it had closed. This is the work of the brain too, because limited visual data is used to build a narrative - filling in temporal space as well as absent physical dimensions. Merleau-Ponty's translucent object is intersected by an infinite number of present moments in time as well as angles of perception. If my cut-outs can prevent the infinite number of present scrutinies by revealing their material form and making themselves incomprehensible as three-dimensional objects, they can also create a temporal block in the mind of the viewer. If the gestures of the cut-out and male subject are not believable then the narrative of the gesture would be disrupted and the stillness of the image would suggest a body without vitality, rather than a moment of action suspended in time. In the 1990s Georges Didi-Huberman wrote *Confronting Images,* in which he argued that Renaissance statues were doomed to contain this lack of vitality because of their "cadaverous rigidity, the closed eyes, all

this obliges the affecting face henceforth to resemble only its most exact, impersonal, and dramatic resemblance - its *resemblance to being dead".*[11] If the statue does not suggest life and sentience, it will always resemble a death mask.

The life-like resemblances of photographic portraiture are not safe-guarded from death either; Barthes described how a photograph could embalm his features, calling the experience of being photographed a "micro-version of death". He recounts how successive photographers asked him to enact all sorts of gestures of living in order to keep the quality of the memento mori from his features.[12] The figures contained in the artworks in this book are arranged to pose using gestures in this way, so that the audience are taken in by the sweep of implied action and fail to spot the unnatural stillness that resides in the female. In some of the photographs in *Interloper* the cut-outs are purposefully presented in a lifeless pose. This significantly reduces the expectation of the viewer – they no longer expect movement to follow the moment of the photograph, because the figure is dead – it is already at the end repose of its final gesture.

The Other Side of the Power of Looking

We pose for the camera, not because we are aware of the dangers of its 'embalming' quality, but because we feel represented by the resulting photograph. In reality our features are in constant motion but the photograph fixes us in a single form which determines who we are for the look of the other. We attempt to idealise our bodies for the lens, we turn ourselves into images – objects of sight.

Laura Mulvey describes this in *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,* "women are simultaneously looked at and displayed; with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness… she holds the look and plays to a signified male desire".[13] The female body doesn't need to act, it is not at the mercy of the memento mori because it is expected to be passive and displayed. It doesn't require an implied narrative, or sequence of events to give it sentience because it is animated by the desire of the observer. When we look at a

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female body we do not possess an objective view of it; we look at it through the screen of sexual codes.

The Dutch genre painters of the seventeenth century coded ostensibly innocent domestic scenes with insinuations of sexual promiscuity. Prostitution was subtly implied by the way a musical instrument was held, the presence of feathers adorning a woman's hat or an empty oyster shell lying on a table. Understanding the full meaning of the 'Bordeeltjes' paintings requires an exhaustive inventory of signifiers because the images contained many cryptic clues to be solved by the viewer. The use of symbols allowed members of respectable society to own and display titillating images of sexual promiscuity without causing offence. The paintings proffered themselves as warnings against slovenliness and loose morals, acting as a visual chastisement. But in reality "[the] point of the symbolism was not to expose sexual behaviour but to shroud it behind a gauze of allusions and metaphors".[14] By ascribing everyday objects with sexual meaning, the character of the female subject could be indirectly described.

In the *Cut to the Measure of Desire* performances the language of symbolism in Dutch Bordeeltjes painting is used to create scenes of concealed, and yet excessive sexuality. Each gesture and prop is carefully chosen to symbolise promiscuity, commerce and desire; the codes that surround me as a figure within the artwork, also contextualise my body for the audience.

Cultural codes are not limited to pictorial messages hidden in paintings; we are surrounded by signs and symbols that we consciously and unconsciously translate. Our bodies are canvases we can use to inscribe information about ourselves, but they are also objects that are read by society in ways that we can't control. The social signifiers that code our appearance reduce complex individuals to generalised group characteristics, and the symbols and gestures that connote desire become the cultural codes used to signify normative femininity. "It is through the fantasies produced by "artists, artisans, designers of dresses and hats, and creators of imaginary forms in general",[15] that certain bodies come to be seen worthier of our libidinal affirmation than others".[16]

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Consumer and consumed

In the early 20th Century Freud wrote an *Introduction to Psychoanalysis* which described how the human mind is driven by unconscious drives that are unknown to the individual, but could be interpreted by psychoanalysis. He said that the objects we covet are not always linked to rational needs, but to irrational, sexual and egotistical desires. Freud's nephew Edward Bernays saw a potential to exploit the unconscious drives and utilise psychoanalysis to effectively market mass-produced goods to the American population. People began to buy because of want instead of need. Like the symbolic objects in Dutch paintings, commercial products were given significance beyond their material attributes. Consumers overestimated the real value of the objects because they appealed directly to their unconscious desires.

Attractive women appeared in adverts selling a wide variety of products, and the potential to satiate desire was the predominate message. Seemingly sexually available, beautiful women suggested to the male consumer what they should buy to attract the affections of other beautiful women. At the same time they suggested to the female viewer that they should emulate them in order to obtain the desire of men. Consumer items became powerful emotional symbols of how individuals wished to be perceived by their peers. The advertising industries constructed a closed world around the ideal image, creating the icons that fill the role of the feminine ideal, an ideal that men desired and women narcissistically wanted to emulate. The advertisers then sold products to the consumer population with the promise that they would help them to achieve these goals. There is an endless cycle of "women exchanged in image and women transforming themselves into image through commodity consumption".[17]

The advertisements do not show a specific person but signify a specific desire. The generalising ability of idealisation destabilises the specifying nature of the photographic image; it loosens the relationship between the photograph and its referent because the images no longer represent the actual body but a generic, desired body. The human body as a tangible object gives way to the female body as a visible object that is not endowed with the attributes of a whole sentient being but is

reduced to a fragment. The female body is a sign, a visual surface that suggests sexual possibility.

Regardless of the medium of communication, women are coded to signify male desire and the sexual messages are built up using commodities. In seventeenth century art, subtle inferences were created by the inclusion of accepted symbols. The symbols could be objects, such as a string of onions (a known aphrodisiac) or a plucked bird (a visual pun on a slang term for sex). They could also take the form of a sexually suggestive gesture like a man pressing his thumb into the bowl of a pipe. Sexual innuendo within contemporary visual culture is overt, but still manifested through objects and gestures. The stiletto shoe and female body are equally objectified and sexualised; they are interchangeable and signify the same desire. If Bordeeltjes paintings are subtle riddles with precise messages to be deciphered by a knowledgeable viewer, contemporary advertising is another type of perception shorthand – a simple abbreviated sign that points directly to a complex web of unconscious desire and cultural, sexual stereotype. They are simple object-associations that shout 'sex' at the observer and then allow them to imagine the diversity of activity that they intimate. They are signs that direct the observer to their own specific, personal fantasies. Our signifiers communicate on a conscious level, but also appeal to the audiences' unconscious desires. The pervasive nature of the message is irresistible and inescapable.

In the photographic series *Visual Pleasure,* I adorn myself in the superficial trappings of femininity; a costume that functions to emphasise my sexuality while concealing it behind an artificial façade. I am not a photographic copy in this work but the construction of my appearance renders me artificial. I lose my individuality in the images and become a generic female instead. Despite appearing 'in the flesh' I am still the visible object, I have transformed myself into an image through commodity. The stereotypical facets of femininity – the stilettos, long hair and red nails – overload my image with sexual symbols, creating an object of desire that is excessive in its display. My body seems unable to bear the weight of its visualness and my appearance becomes grotesque, demonstrating what Silverman called "the impasse at the heart of

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traditional femininity: the impossibility of approximating the images in relation to which one is constantly and inflexibly judged".[18]

In the photographs my whole body is not visible; it appears to have been fragmented into sexual signifiers, fetishized body parts endowed with the ability to satiate desire. In Freudian psychoanalysis the need to create a fetish object is based in castration anxiety; the love object seems to have been castrated, so the fetishist must create a penis for her. The penis substitute could take any form, from a high heeled shoe to a body part or a hair colour. There is an overvaluation of the chosen object – it is raised from an inanimate object into a sexually gratifying replacement for the real person they desire. A photograph of a female body also encourages overvaluation; it invites the viewer to bestow all the characteristics of a sentient being onto its two-dimensional surface. The mind of the viewer adds information and re-inflates the lost dimensions of the body to create the fantasy of a present female form. The female body doesn't have to be actively constituted in the way Barthes described because the desire of the observer animates the body and gives it life.

The idea of fetishism has become synonymous with the use of non-sexual objects for sexual gratification as described by Freud, but it also has other cultural connotations. Marx outlined a theory of commodity fetishism, in which the values of objects are socially constructed and not inherent within the objects themselves. The items we treasure most are not particularly valuable to us socially, but have been elevated through the artificial value system of capitalism. The theory suggests that if the hierarchy of value was based on the objects ability to address our needs, things that help us live would be highly prized and things with little functional use would be seen as valueless. Although fuel, agriculture and water supply can create wealth, our symbols of wealth tend to be the purely decorative – gold, diamonds, ornate architecture and fine art. Capitalism, the advertising world and our unconscious desires collude to promote functionless objects to desirable status symbols.

In both types of fetishism there is an overvaluation of the object; in one the object is wrongly deemed to be sexually satisfying, in the other its financial price overvalues its

cultural worth. The culturally accepted image of femininity transforms its chosen inanimate objects into sexual objects and their functional attributes are subordinated to their decorative appeal. It is stereotypically defined by shoes that can be uncomfortable to walk in, clothes that restrict the body and long nails that could impede simple tasks. The photographic image accentuates the fetishisation of the female body, as it removes the womans sentience and emphasises her erotically coded visible surface. Capitalistic drives and unconscious desire coalesce to create the illusion of sexual gratification through the purchase of commodities.

The Eye of the Beholder

Theorists often describe a neutral process of looking that isn't influenced by prejudice or desire; a viewing position that sees the world without knowledge or emotion to colour the observers opinion. In this process the raw data of the external world is collected without interpreting it or hypothesising about what is missing. But the innocent eye is a fallacy because everything we see is constructed by the culture we reside in, and is deciphered by the mind that perceives it.

Our minds complete what our eyes cannot because visual information alone is inadequate and presents us with an incomprehensible world. It is because of the gaps in our perception of the external world that we are able to project ourselves into it and actively engage in the visible realm. According to Lacan we enter into the visible world in early childhood, through a process he called the Mirror Phase. Prior to the Mirror phase babies comprehend their bodies as fragments that are indistinguishable from the external world. During early infancy the child sees an image of itself, either in a mirror or through identification with another child. Although it does not recognise the image as itself, the completeness of the external body helps it to master the fragments of its own body.[19]

From that moment the boundary between inner self and external reality is permeable and blurred. We internalise the world through tactile sensations and then project our knowledge back out onto the objects we apprehend; our ability to decipher the symbolic codes of our visual culture adds a richness of meaning to what we see. We

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also absorb social attributes, ideals and prejudices which we perform for others and project onto their bodies. We are visible objects for those around us and the powers of interpretation that we use to create meaning on the bodies of others is also used on our own visible surfaces to assume, hypothesise, sexualise, fetishize and objectify.

The homogenization of mental process and visual information is continuous. Vision is a process of reception and projection, and it is impossible to separate one type of information from the other. We will never be able to distinguish the actual from the inferred; as Hume suggests, "we never really advance a step beyond ourselves, nor can conceive any kind of existence but those perceptions that have appeared in that narrow compass. This is the universe of the imagination, nor have we any idea but what is there produced".[20]

Photographic representations seem to offer us something akin to the innocent eye; they are images created by a mechanical recording device that is unbiased in the way it democratically reduces all objects to a two-dimensional surface. The camera, however, shows us more than the eye is capable of seeing. Rather than objectively depicting our bodies, it accentuates our visibleness. The camera is synonymous with what Foucault described as "the normalizing gaze, a surveillance that makes it possible to qualify, to classify and to punish. It establishes over individuals a visibility through which one differentiates and judges them".[21] The body is a 'translucent object' for societal scrutiny. It is trapped within the panoptican, a prison in which it is always visible, although not necessarily always watched. This is the state of perpetual exhibitionism, always imagining yourself to be the object of someone else's sight.

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