

## OLMPYIA, FACIALITY AND THE PUNCTAL PLAY OF DARKNESS

*Phantomwise* (the exhibition title is drawn from a poem by Lewis Carroll) formed around a serendipitous event. The artist's five year old daughter, trapped indoors by rain, and having just seen the *Pocohontas* video, put on an Indian Brave mask lying amongst the litter of playthings and insisted she be photographed. The result was the start of a series of collaborative portraits in which the use of half-masks, props and costumes (often as simple as a walking stick or a set of kid's silk Chinese pyjamas) work together to create what the artist, in deference to the artfully staged Victoria photograph, calls tableau vivant but which, considered in terms of the performative, also constitute a kind of punctal death.

Indeed, the photographs, conceived entirely as a system of burlesque contrivances and yet somehow still functioning as intimate portraits (for Olympia also had her theatrical and sometimes willful say) interrogate the metaphysics of presence and so arrive on Nietzsche's doorstep which, of course, is the portal leading into the dark labyrinth.

It is not just that photography is necessarily an embalming of the virtual but that the living and breathing daughter cast or posing as vertiginous sequence of proliferating masks (*Last Pharaoh, Elizabeth 1, Grannie, Chef, Jack Tar, Legal Counsel*, what have you) must always exceed containment within any techno-representative system insisting upon a singularizing of bodies and the simulacral reduction of the subject to a recognizable "One". This is because Olympia, like Carroll's Alice, is *found* wandering the labyrinth not as any finally accomplished girl but as radical faciality itself - a potentially infinite set of alien "selves" displayed not as depth but always syntagmatically sideways as superficial or immaculate surface embodiment. At the exact same time the photographer is ironically doomed to only ever seize her daughter in the punctal moment of an arrested and thus totalized gaze - precisely what Olympia's painted-mask would return in the form of an artistically killing grotesque.

The condition of photography, to follow Barthes' famous point then, is found exposed - immaculately laid out as it were - as a system of what we might usefully name here "mortography". For the sheer emptiness of Olympia consummated as superlative mask-effect is itself mimeticised as the camera's own constitutional inability to capture anything even closely approaching the velocity of virtual becomings and *durée* - lived time. In this manner, photographic performativity reveals, or better still, spectacularly presents itself as the ossified body or remains of its own so fastidiously staged endeavors.

This leads us to the issue of outside and inside and the super-saturated selenium blackness of the photographs. The structure of the masks as partial bit-parts covering the upper portion of Olympia's face, and which include the vital feature of

the eyes (thus both figurally and actually masking not just the face's surface but the surface of the gaze) has the implication of rendering the lower portions of the face into yet another screen or radically amputated body portion and thus a mask of merely another uncanny kind. The seamless flow of one mask into the other - a fluid movement that would also weave painted artifice into breathing flesh further perpetuates and aggravates an uncanny economy whereby we end up not with two masks somehow neatly constituting a coherent and settled gestalt but the dreadful Frankensteinian possibility of an infinite series of masks organically or even monstrously interleaving flesh and mechanical non-flesh to create a scionic space, a space of sutures and grafts, a space endlessly shunting away the promise of the face to open, to blossom, candidly, onto truth of any kind. The theatre props such as Elizabethan ruffle, legal wig and Geisha parasol do the exact same thing - genealogically parade the perfect shallowness of history, ethnicity and also gender.

What this interstitial space does then, in its own parasitic machinic manner, is corrupt appearance by rendering it internally riven with difference. The outside of the face, in other words, is found as what is always deposited inside another face, just as what is presumably composed inside or behind the other face, the alien face of the other (for Olympia's chosen masks dress up with their characterful headgear and faux-eyes as they duplicitously *lie* over her corporeal own) is merely another facial deployment: one delivering all facial appearances to the dizzying blackness of the labyrinth even as it proposes or pretends, via a weirdly spectacular camouflaging, to be, somehow, her real face. What the performative act of masking does is empty anterior depth (with its incumbent penetrative claim for deep truth) out onto the sheer slickness of a glossy faciality that would now be fetishistically seen as coextensive with the shining lacquered black-and-white face of the photographic print.

In this way we are led to consider the overwhelming final pungent blackness of these photographs as the groundless ground of performativity itself - one in which the sitter is suspended as though sheer hallucination and into which she is expunged just as one into which we (as watchers) can lucidly gaze even as we are consumed as though by the phosphorescent suction of a magical pool.

We best know this hyperblackness working as acute performativity from the paintings of Caravaggio. Here too we have the same hyperrealistic voluminous looming of microscopic details, the same intricate Baroque pleats and foldings and sudden blinding passages of brightness that do not transcend the blackness so much as somehow proprioceptively enact its own abysmal narrative impulses. Conceived as various illuminated inflections of blackness's own play, the quotational and hence necessarily iconic citations of period character "donned" by Olympia (who is also playing at being entirely other or exotic "things") recoils infectively back to occupy her, thus ensuring her own occupation, or, better still, incorporation, by an effulgent corps noir that is ever waiting. At stake here is the entire sentimentalizing history of photography. At stake is the assumption of inevitable sweetness emanating from the domestic mantelpiece "snap".

*Phantomwise* returns to haunt us precisely because it would conflate photography's own self-memorializing or cryptographic practice into the ghostly deployment of the self. That a mother might not ever come to know her own daughter - even as a daughter would never ever like *Wonderland's* Alice, truly catch herself up, would speak not only to the terminal velocity of all self-knowledge quests but mark identity as itself the photographic condition *par excellence*. What need to mention then the trail deposited by Ariadne's thread?

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