R for Replicant

JANUARY 19-APRIL 10, 2010

Eleanor Antin
Jennifer Bornstein
Juan Capistran
Bruce Conner
Mario Garcia Torres
Rodney Graham
Colter Jacobsen
Tim Lee
Daniel Joseph Martinez

Kristen Morgin
Catherine Opie
Raymond Pettibon
Allen Ruppersberg
Mark Soo
Ron Terada
Jeff Wall
Ian Wallace
James Welling

Of This Quiz, I Cannot Guarantee a Univocal Truth

XIAOYU WENG

Fake realities will create fake humans. Or, fake humans will generate fake realities and then sell them to other humans, turning them, eventually, into forgeries of themselves.

—PHILIP K. DICK

Consider the Voight-Kampff machine, an imaginary mechanism of interrogation used to distinguish humans from replicants (or androids) first proposed by the American writer Philip K. Dick in his 1968 novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* and later visually represented in Ridley Scott's 1982 science-fiction classic, *Blade Runner.* The Voight-Kampff test involves a series of questions intended to elicit emotional reactions in order to detect a capacity for empathy. The test's result becomes ambiguous, however, when it is conducted on an experimental replicant model whose artificially implanted memories allow her to generate empathic responses. The metaphor of the test thus suggests the possible interchangeability of the artificial (memory) and the real (experience), and ultimately questions the very notions of existence and reality.

The exhibition *R for Replicant* takes as its starting point a twist on the Voight-Kampff test: If the replicant is not merely a simulation of a human but rather a being that experiences an alternative reality, then perhaps images do not provide replicas of reality, or fake realities, but alternative realities that might or might not be experienced. The exhibition features works from the 101 Collection that comment on contemporary image production through interventions related to history, narrative, memory, and experience. It aims to explore how images shape and challenge our understanding of reality, and specifically our understanding of American identity.

There is of course a long, and ongoing, discourse around image production and its relationship to the representation of reality. Walter Benjamin's landmark 1935
essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” highlighted the mechanical means of mass mediation as a modern invention and drew attention to the ideological performance of images in the politics of modern culture. The study of signs in Roland Barthes’s 1957 book *Mythologies* tracked the messages of commodities and the power hidden in the media and advertising imagery. Guy Debord in *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967) characterized capitalist society as an accumulation of spectacles in which social relations are mediated by images, creating systematic segregation and isolation. Through a discussion of images and signs, Jean Baudrillard’s *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981) claimed that the reality of today’s society has been replaced by a simulation of reality. More recently, Jacques Rancière in *The Future of the Image* (2003), a selection of his essays on visual art and its relationship with politics, argued that words and images are inseparable, proposing a new texture of communal existence through the concept of the “sentence-image.”

*R for Replicant* proposes an investigation of the “materiality” of image production by tackling the issue of what images can or cannot make visible. Materiality, in the context of this exhibition, does not refer to the works’ physical presences through print, drawing, film, et cetera, but rather to an understanding of images—recycled and accelerated to the point of seizing their own means of production—becoming actual things, interfering in real life, affecting it, and even altering it.

The structure of the exhibition is intended as a kind of variation on the Volght-Kampff machine. Artists/artworks, audiences/artworks, and artists/audiences operate as both inquisitors and suspects. While artists examine American identity by proposing alternative realities, audiences’ perceptions of received ideologies are challenged, and the notions of reality and the regime of truth become uncertain through image interpretations.

Let us start our “interrogation test” by zooming in to focus on the West Coast, where the [10] Collection is based. Among the popular icons of suburban America, California’s road system is particularly pervasive, and it appears in both Catherine Opie’s *Untitled #16 and #26* (1994) and Allen Ruppersberg’s *Untitled (City Limits)* (1970). Opie’s pictures, from her *Freeway* series, depict Southern California freeways. Through a contrast in scale between the actual sites and the photographs,
Opie not only suggests the monumentality of these modern structures but also indicates that everyday reality is the basis for the creation of icons and identities. At first glance Ruppersberg's photographs seem to be random snapshots of city-limit signs, yet a closer examination reveals small details; in front of the lower-right corner of each sign, for instance, there is a hand holding a pulp magazine. The juxtaposition of the road signs and the magazine covers gives both an additional material quality. When confronted as a sequence, the five pictures promise a possible story, some further interpretation.

California is also home to the global film industry, which is responsible for many popular ideologies of the Wild West. Stephanie Barron says that California "may arguably be the site in the 20th century in which image permanently detached itself from reality." Ron Terada's Maiko (2008) and Rodney Graham's Dance!!!! (2008) both draw inspiration from films set in California. Referencing Blade Runner, which takes place in an apocalyptically futuristic Los Angeles, Terada's Maiko #1, #2 and #3 depict white women dressed as maikos (apprentice geishas), mimicking the Japanese woman on a billboard in one scene of the movie. Terada's "ethnic simulation" mocks the fetishism of Asian culture as a fashionable lifestyle. But also, more importantly, beneath the apparent critique of a conventional longing for exoticism, Terada indicates a covert apprehension about the rising power of the East. Dance!!!! appears to be a bit of nostalgia: that hackneyed scene from numerous Hollywood Westerns in which a man is forced to dance in a saloon by another man shooting bullets at his feet. But it is actually the artist himself in the role of the dancer, clicking his heels in midair; thus wittily questioning the "true" origin of every Western scene held in our collective cultural memory. Both Terada's and Graham's works can be considered "staged photographs" through appropriation, but at the same time they are reenactments of "an event," one that is imaginary and possesses "objectlike" qualities, falsifying personal experience on multiple levels.

While some of the works in the exhibition focus on Western icons, others look at American culture more generally, for instance the phenomena of YouTube and reality television. Jennifer Bornstein's video Collector's Favorites (1994) is an episode of an actual reality TV-style program in which ordinary people were invited to present their personal collections. When it comes her turn to "perform," Bornstein displays mundane, but elaborately archived, consumer objects such as coffee lids, plastic straws, candy wrappers, and product labels. Through the medium of public broadcasting, then, she makes visual the frequently overlooked but massive cultural penetration of advertising, and its proliferation via images. Mario Garcia Torres's One Minute to Act a Title: Kim Jong Il Favorite Movies (2005) is reminiscent of
DIY YouTube film clips. The artist invited friends to act out titles from a movie list—supposedly a list of the North Korean dictator's favorites. The skits are not based on scenes from the movies, however; they are literal interpretations of the titles. Garcia Torres thereby separates the movies from their original contexts, confusing our memories of the experience of watching them as well as our judgments about the veracity of the information he offers.

Tim Lee, Mark Soo, and Juan Capistran invite us to revisit and reinterpret particular historical moments through constellations of references to a variety of cultural figures. Inspired by the work of the early-20th-century avant-garde artist Alexander Rodchenko, Lee's Untitled (Alexander Rodchenko, 1928) (2008) is a series of self-portraits ‘by’ a vintage Leica I camera—in other words, photographs of the camera taken by the camera itself, with the help of a mirror apparatus, which narrate and reflect its own history and identity. Soo's That's Alright Mama Mama (2008), designed to be viewed with 3D glasses, is a photographic intervention into imagined “documentation” of the studio where Elvis Presley recorded his legendary song. The title of the work, the 3D effects, and the two images of the scenario generate a double of a double of the historical moment. Capistran's The Breaks (2000) documents him breakdancing (in between rounds by security guards) on Carl Andre's lead floor at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. His aim is clear: to challenge the hierarchy between street culture and high art. All of these works assert that fiction has the disruptive power to materialize images into things, constructions, and memories of a history that has not actually been experienced.

The materiality of images is clear in works by Colter Jacobsen, Daniel Joseph Martinez, Kristen Morgin, and Raymond Pettibon, not only through the pieces' relatively obvious material appearances but more importantly through their candid acknowledgment of images as objects of cultural and political commerce. Jacobsen's Victory at Sea (Phenakistoscopes) (2007) is based on a classic device that generates moving optical illusions. By dissecting the process of mechanical reproduction, Jacobsen divorces the objects from the "reality" that was pre-registered to the images of them. Martinez's sculpture A MEDITATION ON THE POSSIBILITY OF ROMANTIC LOVE OR WHERE YOU GOIN' WITH THAT GUN IN YOUR HAND, BOBBY SCALE AND HUEY NEWTON DISCUSS THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN EXPRESSIONISM AND SOCIAL REALITY PRESENT IN HITLER'S PAINTINGS (2005), depicting the legendary Black Panther leaders Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale in white Carrara marble, comments on the tradition of monumental and heroic sculpture. By transforming silhouettes into objects and stiffening historical events into images, the artist reminds us of the interchangeability
among events, images, and objects. Both Morgin and Pettibon take cartoons and comic strips as their points of departure. Pettibon's drawings No Title (Eh? What do) (2008), No Title (Without the comics) (2007), No Title (The end. One) (2005), No Title (Superman) (2005), and No Title (Mushroom cloud) (2000) actively blend narrative and document, personal and political, thus unmasking the illusion of representation. Morgin's clay sculptures Crime Reporter (2008) and Toy Tank for Uyu Ji (2007) speak of childhood memories. By reproducing these memories in a material manner, she also comments on the culture and ideology that lay behind the production of such objects.

Treating images and sequences as material objects, or readymades, Bruce Conner and Ian Wallace employ a form of narration that arises from the interconnection or juxtaposition of images. By freeing images from their original constraints, they produce new, often obscure, visual puns. In keeping with his signature strategy of reimagining his own films, Conner's last completed film, Easter Morning (2008), is derived from eight-millimeter footage he shot decades earlier for Easter Morning Raga (1966). By expanding the images in duration, gauge, and frame rate, Conner devises an enigmatic effect of visual transcendence, or "imagelessness," distancing viewers from their preconceptions of what they are watching. Wallace's Study for My Heroes in the Street (Stan) (1986-92) is a collage of photo documentation of a street view with inserted painted canvas strips. While the photograph objectively records the scene, the canvases constitute a fictional detail by both blocking and augmenting the context. Together they generate an indeterminate image, inviting viewers to imagine details of the urban background.

Jeff Wall's Pipe Opening (2002), James Welling's Stowe (2006), and Eleanor Antin's 100 Boots (1971-73) create various kinds of tension between realistic documentary and fictional storytelling. They pose questions as to what kind of experiences produce "true" images and how experiences become memories. Pipe Opening and Stowe share a theatrical, "behind-the-scenes" narrative sensibility. The former is a direct document of a "real" scene that Wall "encountered by chance" in daily life, whereas the latter is a photographic manipulation with an ambiguous reference to the writer Harriet Beecher Stowe. Both works encourage the viewer to experience the scenario and to imagine the "before" and "after" of the moment. Antin's 100 Boots, comprised of 51 picture postcards, is an epic visual narrative of 100 boots making a "trip" from California to New York. Over two and a half years, Antin photographed the boots against different backgrounds along the way, and then turned the pictures into postcards, which she mailed to approximately 1,000 people around the world.
the world. In conjunction with the boots' "arrival" in New York, the postcards were exhibited at the city's Museum of Modern Art. The project speaks about the reproduction and dissemination of images, and also about how the material reality of the images—their settings and their existence in mailboxes—interfered with the everyday reality of the sites in the pictures and the daily lives of the people who received the cards.

Whether playing with iconographies, borrowing cinematic imagery, commenting on popular culture, referencing and reconstructing history, reorganizing existing objects and images, or storytelling via documentary, the artworks in this exhibition use various strategies to create new meanings beyond their connections to existing realities. History and stories, documentary images and staged images, actual locations and invented scenes are all parts of the same regime of truth. The exhibition does not seek a dystopic denial of the existence of reality but rather a diversification of the notion of reality, accomplished by undermining the hierarchical distinction between fact and fiction.

Whereas the humorous title of Dick's novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* upholds the traditional assumption that androids are machines and run on electricity, the renaming in *Blade Runner* of *androids* to *replicants*, given the latter term's associations with microbiology and genetic engineering, redefines them as alternative beings, different than human. This redefinition of their characters actually points to a constellation of inquiries regarding identity: the identity of the replicants, of us as readers and viewers, and of human beings in general. Pushing these inquiries a step further, this exhibition questions not only the identity of America as presented in the works, and the identity of today's artists as image makers and cultural producers, but also our own identities as consumers and observers of the visual culture that we encounter in our daily lives.

NOTES

1. In his novel, Dick used the traditional term *android* to describe humanoid replicas. The word *replicant* was created for *Blade Runner* to avoid preconceived associations with robots, machines, et cetera, and to evoke ideas of cell duplication and cloning.


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