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3. The Appended Subject

Race and Identity as Digital Assemblage

Jennifer González

To append is to attach or fix something onto something else. The Latin root *pendere* means to *hang*—to hang something (an arm, a leg, a text) onto something else. In an uncanny way, an appendage is always considered integral to the object to which it is also an addition. The simultaneous necessity and marginality of the appendage also characterizes many of those material practices, objects and signs that are said to construct forms of social and cultural identification. Signs grafted onto the human subject—such as clothing or names, projections of others based upon historical circumstances, location, language—enunciate both defining elements of that subject and part of an external, changing narrative into which that subject is drawn—voluntarily or involuntarily—as a participant. The “appended subject” has several connotations here: that of a subject that is comprised of appendages, of parts put together, of supplementary materials, or that of a subject or person who is defined by a relation of supplementarity, added to some other principal body—as the colonized subject might be perceived by an imperial nation as an appendage to a centralized state. Finally, the appended subject describes an object constituted by electronic elements serving as a psychic or bodily appendage, an artificial

subjectivity that is attached to a supposed original or unitary being, an online persona understood as somehow appended to a real person who resides elsewhere, in front of a keyboard. In each case a body is constructed or assembled in order to stand in for, or become an extension of, a subject in an artificial but nevertheless inhabited world.

The concept of an appended subject is used in this essay in order to account for contemporary artists' representations of utopic spaces on the World Wide Web and the visible models of embodied subjects produced therein. This relatively new domain for the phantasmatic projection of subjectivity (new in comparison to other media such as film, television, advertising and forms of cultural spectacle that produce patterns of identification) has also been championed as an innovative space for the reinscription or redefinition of social relations, as well as the reconceptualization of the traditional markers of race and ethnicity, sexuality and gender. There are currently thousands of online spaces that allow users to experiment with identity in an artificial world. The original form of such sites—MUDs or MOOs—are collaborative writing projects in which people describe or define a physical presence, contribute to a textual architecture, and converse with other online participants. Media theorists and communications scholars have provided the most sophisticated and extensive readings of this social collective practice. Much has already been written about the agony and ecstasy of gender swapping, virtual sex, passing, and politics on these sites.¹ As computer monitors and Internet interfaces have increased in their capacity to display visual information over the last decade, online sites with image and sound components have become popular. In these “habitats” or “palaces” a textual description of the user is superseded or supplemented by a visual icon—usually called an avatar.

Even a superficial glance at online sites that distribute or sell avatars is instructive, revealing a common set of identificatory fantasies created by individual whim as well as popular demand. Simple grids of images (scanned photographs, drawings, cartoons) are arranged thematically (as movie stars or “avamarks,” soft-porn models or “avatarts,” muscular men or “avahunks,” trouble-makers or “avapunks,” cats, dogs, Native Americans, blondes, brunettes, happy faces, Hula dancers, space aliens, medieval knights, and corporate logos) apparently following an internal logic of demand but tacitly referencing a social typology in which such categories mark out a hierarchy of social relations and stereotypes. The availability of these images for sale makes literal a public circulation of ego ideals while simultaneously naturalizing the market-

place as the privileged domain—beyond family, church or state—of contemporary identity construction and consumption.

The enactment of racial identity in online sites takes a variety of forms. In some cases users will self-identify (as white, black, Latino) in chats that solicit discussion on the topic of race. In other cases, race or ethnicity will be a defining feature of a website to which users send photographs of themselves, such as sites that function as support groups for mixed-race couples. My focus here, however, is on the phantasmatic representation of race or ethnicity and in particular on models of hybrid racial identity that take the form of avatars or other visual assemblages of human bodies. Insofar as racial and ethnic identity are conceived in many cases to be limited to visible signs such as skin color, eye color, or bone structure, they are also conceived as decorative features to be attached or detached at will in the so-called artificial or virtual context of cyberspace. Such play with racial identity nevertheless can and does have concrete consequences as real as those occurring in other cultural domains of social exchange such as literature, film or music. Because “passing” (or pretending to be what one is not) in cyberspace has become a norm rather than an exception, the representation of race in this space is complicated by the fact that much of the activity online is about becoming the fantasy of a racial other.

Homi Bhabha's 1986 essay “The Other Question” has been useful to my own work for its elaboration of the link between racial stereotyping and the structural disavowal that characterizes fetishism. Stereotypes are created by colonizing cultures, Bhabha asserts, in order to mask real cultural difference. In order to disavow this difference, as well as the complex subjecthood of the colonized population, the stereotype presents itself as a fetish—in the form of literature, images, speech—by which the possible threat of the “other's” difference is transformed into a safe fantasy for the colonizer. Thus “the recognition and disavowal of difference is always disturbed by the question of its representation or construction.”² Bhabha's analysis succeeds in drawing out the relations of power that underlie the colonialist enterprise and that become manifest in social and material practices. Something on the same order of analysis is required, I believe, to address the fantasy utopias or dystopias of the Web that reproduce stereotypes (particularly of race and gender) at an impressive pace.

My brief analysis here is motivated largely by a curiosity concerning representations of human bodies online. How do such visual representations extend or challenge current conceptions of racial and cultural identity and relations of power? In what ways is human identity equated with the notion of

a bodily assemblage? What are the possible ramifications of such an equation for conceptions of cultural hybridity on the one hand, or a revived eugenics on the other?

Two provocative sites will serve as a point of discussion, though there are many others appearing daily. *UNDINA*, by the Russian artist Kostya Mitenev, and *Bodies© INCorporated*, by U.S.-based artist Victoria Vesna, appear inspired, at least in part, by the contemporary phenomenon of avatar production. Both websites deviate somewhat from the norm, putting an unusual spin on the production of "appended subjects," particularly as those subjects are conceived as assembled from disparate iconic elements. Each site offers the user the opportunity to construct or "submit" visual images of a body or of body parts, and to examine other bodies that have been put on display. These two sites were chosen for comparison because the human body is their primary focus and race or ethnicity as elements of identity are conspicuous in their presence or absence in each case. Both sites use the space of the computer screen to depict bodies in pieces, either as photographic images or three-dimensional renditions of corporeal fragments (arms, legs, heads, torsos) that can be selected from a menu or reassembled. I am particularly interested in the ramifications of such artistic projects for thinking about the interpellation of individuals as embodied subjects and the political, ethical, and aesthetic notions of choice that they imply.

Identity as Bodily Assemblage: Parts and Proximate Relations

The title of Kostya Mitenev's website, *UNDINA*, is an acronym for United Digital Nations. Linked to a collective webpage for a group of Russian artists and scholars who identify themselves as Digital Body and who participate in exhibitions held in the Bionet Gallery, as well as to the home page for the city of St. Petersburg, the site has an international, cosmopolitan, and diplomatic feel. At the same time, *UNDINA* is clearly positioned as a work of contemporary art, sited within its own electronic gallery and addressing an audience of other artists and designers. Indeed, the line between so-called high art and the visual culture that pervades the World Wide Web has long been institutionally crossed insofar as museums of art (ICA London, the Guggenheim Museum, the Museum of Modern Art, and so on) regularly display online art projects; institutions of art education in industrialized nations offer computer graphics as a central component of their curricula; and art critics produce many online

and offline publications that address exclusively online art practice. At the same time, the work is not unlike other sites that are presented for entertainment, commerce, or information. The space is electronic, the vernacular is based on standards of hardware and software, and the audience is unpredictable. To study works of art in this context thus invites comparison to a broader field of visual culture (i.e. avatar production) as well as to parallels in other fine art practices and performances.

On the opening page of Kostya Mitenev's *UNDINA* appears the familiar figure of Leonardo Da Vinci's fifteenth-century Vitruvian Man, with arms and legs outstretched, floating in geometric perfection (see fig. 1). An ironic gesture on the part of Mitenev, the Vitruvian Man situates his work within and against a tradition of figurative normativity. Leonardo's geometry becomes a sign of the standard against which the artist develops his own model of contemporary human form and being, while at the same time the body of man is read as the central axis in a futurology of body archetypes. Mitenev accuses this standard (here renamed *Xyman*) of having dominated European cultural representations of the body "for half a millennium."³ Part of the goal of the *UNDINA* website, according to the artist, is to de-center this traditional form with a set of collectively constructed new future bodies.

Comprised of three separate domains, the *UNDINA* site includes a virtual gallery space that can be navigated with VRML technology, a planetary system "populated" by cultural archetypes, and, the central focus of the work, what might be called a future-body table of new physical types. This last consists of a screen space divided into a grid of nine squares, depicting the head, torso, and legs of three vertical figures (see fig. 2). Body or body-part images that have been submitted by users or that the artist has included himself are joined or stacked together to form a monstrous or fantastical mixing of sex, age and race into a single body. The artist comments, "In the project of *UNDINA* the intrigue of the collective modeling of the body of the future is maintained." His plan is to make "a wide range catalog of visual delirium of future images of the body and to create a model or space of international foresight of artistic images of future bodies." In the process, he suggests that "you can choose your own model of a body, alternatively you can create it yourself with your computer. The bodies are timeless and anonymous, that frees the self in the space of the meta-world." He adds in conclusion that "Artists of non-European traditions of conceptualizing and visualizing of the body are specially invited."⁴ Mitenev's project appears progressive in so far as it aims to undermine narrow conceptions of human being; to shift European standards of

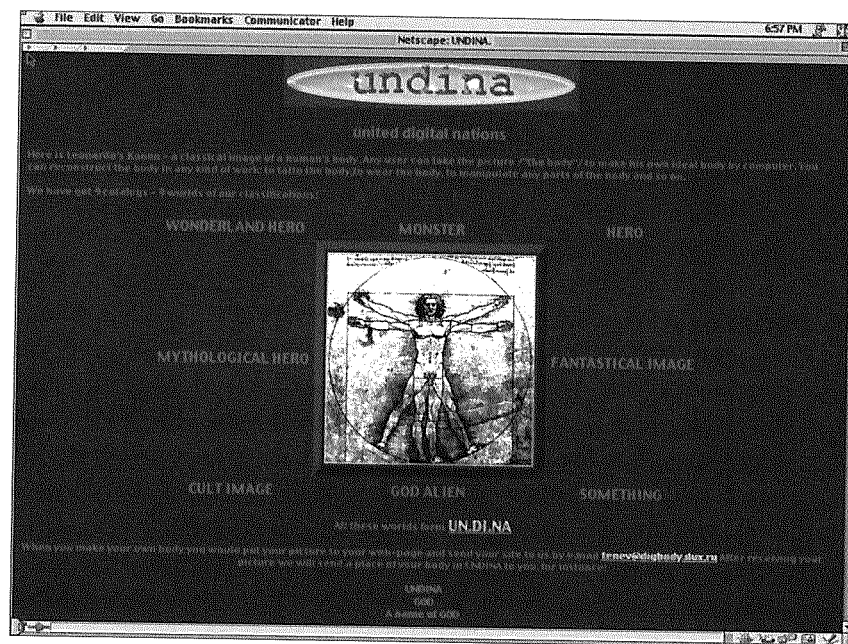


Figure 1 • UNDINA

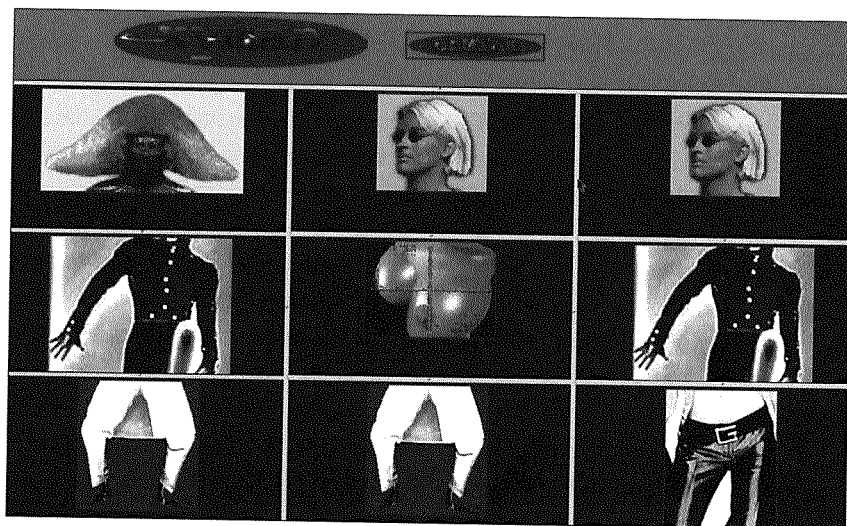


Figure 2 • UNDINA

body normativity from center to margin; to offer a United Digital Nations of diverse international membership as a model for future cultural contact, perhaps even a “global” village. But UNDINA’s effort to escape the culture of the stereotype oddly reinscribes its narrow confines. The result is more akin to what might be a fantasy in the form of the surrealist game *Exquisite Corpse*.

The bodies in Mitenev’s body grid are “timeless” or perhaps more precisely, heterochronic, insofar as they are comprised of both historical and contemporary images that are also constantly shifting, the mix-and-match elements recurring or transforming into new configurations. Along the row of heads, for example, one might see a portrait by Archimboldo or Rossetti, a 1940s photograph of a beautiful black woman’s face, or the head of a white male fashion model; at torso level there might appear the bare breasts of a pornography model, a scantily clad dark-skinned woman or a white man in a suit and tie; and for legs a pair of combat boots, a photograph of female—or in the rare instance, male—genitalia and bare legs, or the tender feet of an infant. These and many other images flash continually on and off in this imaginary game of human exhibition and hybridization. Fantasies of undressing and connecting with cultural “others” are expressed in a painfully awkward montage, resulting in a strange dysplasia.

Leaving behind this screen of automated flesh, the user can travel to the planetary realm of UNDINA populated by selected archetypal figures of the artist’s futurology. Rather than dissecting these bodies into a set of interchangeable parts, the artist presents them within categories of his own devising. One can visit, for example, the planet of the gods, the aliens, the heroes, the mythological heroes, the wonderland heroes, the cult images, the fantastical images, or the monsters. Here, future bodies are not so much hybrids as characters within an almost literary taxonomy, and there seems to be little distinction between Mitenev’s work and the cultural stereotypes provided by other avatar sites. For example, aliens are either black men or blue space creatures; heroes are white men with blond hair; killers wear African headdresses; and cult images include nude women of color.

Mitenev’s work, perhaps unconsciously, perpetuates damaging racial and sexual stereotypes—in itself nothing new in art or visual culture; yet, UNDINA is all the more insidious because of its utopic and inclusive rhetoric. Indeed, I would probably not address this work if it were not for its supposed attempt to picture a progressive model of future subjectivity. In this context, the most interesting aspect of the site is the series of images that comprise the automatic body table, those future bodies exemplified in a nonunitary, hybrid form. This

ambitious attempt to reproduce a model of cultural mixing through an intersection of photographic images appears in an equally insidious way in *Time* magazine, in an article entitled "The New Face of America" (1993). Donna Haraway has commented, "*Time* magazine's matrix of morphed racial mixtures induces amnesia about what it costs, and what might be possible when flesh-and-blood people confront the racialized structure of desire and/or reproduction collectively and individually."⁵ Evelyn M. Hammonds comments that

Morphing, with its facile device of shape-changing, interchangeability, equivalency, and feigned horizontality in superficial ways elides its similarity with older hierarchical theories of human variation. [...] With the *Time* cover we wind up not with a true composite, but a preferred or filtered composite of mixed figures with no discussion of the assumptions or implications underlying the choices.⁶

What both UNDINA and *Time* magazine offer in the form of a visual representation is a dissection of a fantasy subject along the gross criteria of bodily appendages or genotype, with little or no consideration of other cultural factors such as language, economic class, or political practice. It is similar to the process that Margaret Morse sees operating in the morphing of human faces in Michael Jackson's *Black or White* music video: "Ideologically, the work of achieving harmony among different people disappears along with the space in between them."⁷ The artist's desire to produce timeless and anonymous bodies creates precisely the kind of historical elision that erases any complex notion of cultural identity. Here a hybrid identity is presumed to reside in or on the visible markers of the body, the flesh. In a sense, Mitenev beautifully illustrates the projective power of stereotyping. Here the *subject* is distilled from the assembled components (appendages) of the *body*.

This reading of the body as a coded form, a visible map, of the subject is as familiar as the idea of the symptom, as basic to visual culture as the process of photographic mimesis that followed painting in a long line of efforts to capture the subject through a record, an imprint of the body. But it is not this history that is of greatest importance here. Mitenev's work has less in common with the history of portraiture than with the experiments enacted in the name of modernity, the split and divided corporeality of twentieth-century visual collage, photomontage, and assemblage that attempts to map an unstable subjectivity with the collection or appropriation of disparate images and objects. I have already suggested a parallel with the surrealist game Exquisite Corpse,

here played out electronically. It is also clear that this site derives its formal structures from photomontage. Indeed, an oblique reference to Hannah Höch's work can be found in Mitenev's use of an African headdress that bears a remarkable resemblance to *Denkmal II: Eitelkeit* (*Monument II: Vanity*) from the series *Aus einem ethnographischen Museum* (*From an Ethnographic Museum*) of 1926.

Insofar as Kostya Mitenev's project relies upon, or at least gestures toward, these artistic precedents, it is tempting to read UNDINA as simply an electronic extension of a familiar formal practice, but is also something more. The site might be read as a progressive recognition of the *fact* of cultural hybridity, a recognition that humans are all produced through genetic and linguistic mixes. Yet, as I note above, the mix in Mitenev's universe depends upon cultural stereotypes for its model of the future. I have written elsewhere that the very concept of hybridity is haunted by its assumption of original purity.⁸ UNDINA, finally, does little to subvert the racial or cultural hierarchies that underlie its playful, monstrous hybrids.

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* was an exploration of psychological and moral transformation, but it is remembered best in popular culture as the story of the reanimation of dead flesh, the production of a monstrosity out of parts of human bodies. The monstrous, as Barbara Maria Stafford reminds us, derives etymologically from the Latin *monstrare* "to show," from *monere*, "to warn," and has come to mean the unnatural mixing of elements that do not belong together—a mixing of elements most often read as a tragic accident.⁹ While Frankenstein's monster was no accident, Shelley's novel implies that the monstrous is nevertheless a product of tragedy. It is as if the various parts of the beast, acting in disunion or disharmony, create his inability to cohere as a subject.

The step from the tragic monster to the tragic mulatto or mestizo was a short one in the nineteenth century. The hybrid subject is never considered immune from the vicissitudes of fate or of the repercussions of unnatural union. Here there is also a notion of the body in pieces, somehow unable to become accurately assembled into a properly functioning subject or citizen—hence the laws banning miscegenation that were only repealed in the United States in 1968. Thirty years later, the once forbidden has become an unlikely ideal. What is the appeal of such a subject position (still presented as monstrous) at the end of the twentieth century?

In the context of post-Soviet Russia, it may be a radical act to suggest or visually represent racial and cultural hybridity. This gesture may have some

impact on contemporary political activism. At the same time, the work does little to undo the essentializing tendency common in many well-intentioned efforts to populate the World Wide Web with a variety of human types. Instead, the body fragment is used as a fetish to make cultural difference palatable, as an element of desire, of consumption. The synecdochic quality of the fetish, its status as a part object that allows pleasure, appears in UNDINA's formal, visual dissection and literal truncation of corporeal signs. Even the body as a whole, represented in parts, reproduces a fetishistic structure of disavowal, an occlusion of both the original subject and of the *historical relations between concrete bodies*, of enforced racial mixing, of colonialism. Yet, Mitenev's future bodies are presented as part of a new archetypal architecture of diplomacy. If the artist wishes his audience to play out the metaphor of a United Digital Nations, then what kind of diplomacy, dialog or action can take place in this context? Is the lack of a fixed subject position, a shifting set of bodily apparatus, enough to constitute or provoke, as the artist seems to hope, a new international consciousness? In short, what set of relations is being offered to the audience as the model of future global interchange? Despite its claims of collaborative construction UNDINA perpetuates a unidirectional, uncritical reiteration of precisely the hegemony it claims to critique, and it does so using racial mixing as its model.

In a different way, shifting from an imagined global community to a corporate one, artist Victoria Vesna also takes up the visual metaphor of the body-in-pieces to figure a new elemental species. Bodies© INCorporated is an art project based at the University of California at Santa Barbara, created by Victoria Vesna and a team of collaborators including Robert Nideffer, Nathaniel Freitas, Kenneth Fields, Jason Schleifer and others (see fig. 3). The site is designed to allow users to "build out bodies in 3-D space, graphically visualizing what were previously bodies generated as text-only."¹⁰ Bodies© INC clearly situates its origins within the world of avatar manufacturers, yet it also foregrounds the manner in which bodies can be conceived as part of a corporate or institutional structure in contemporary capitalist culture. It hovers in its own liminal space, a pun on the term "incorporated" that becomes a simultaneous critique of corporate culture and a capitulation to its terms of enunciation. For example, as with many other websites, visitors to the site must agree to recognize and abide by various copyright restrictions, legal disclaimers, and limits of liability—including liability for *disappointment* in the outcome of the body one constructs. This witty, self-conscious irony runs throughout the text of the site, drawing upon the rhetoric of advertising as well as making subtle and often satirical gestures toward the politics of identity and, in this case, the very notion

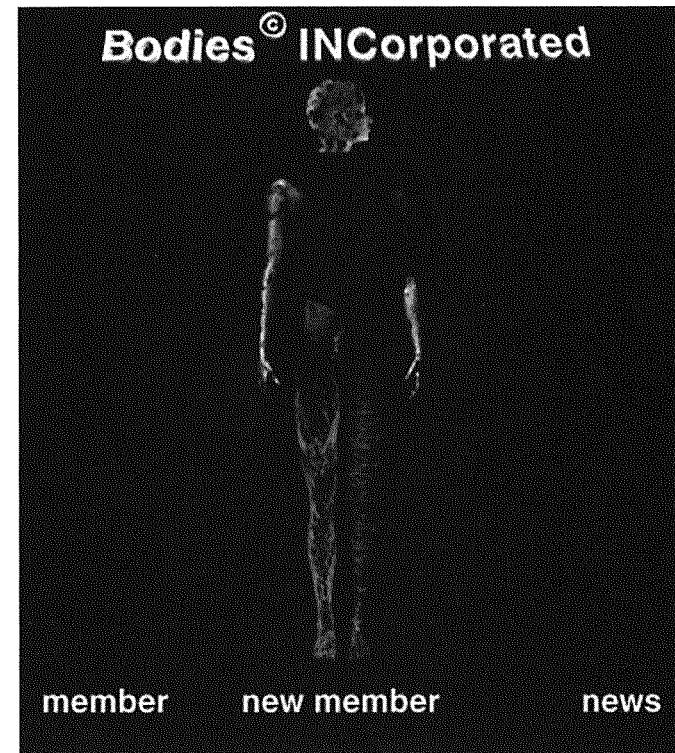


Figure 3 • Bodies© INC

of satisfaction guarantees or the lack thereof in the complex construction of a bodily identity. For here, as in Mitenev's world, the construction of a body is expressly linked to the construction of identity. The opening page of the site welcomes the new visitor, who is informed that the site "functions as an institution through which your body gets shaped in the process of identity construction that occurs in, and mutually implicates, both the symbolic and material realms."¹¹ The important relation between the material and the symbolic for Vesna is that between the shaping of the body and the construction of identity (the former being the apparent process by which the latter is achieved). While this equation echoes the assumptions of eugenics, it also can be read, alternatively, as a progressive assertion that identities are always inseparable from corporeal encounters and the symbolic inscription of bodily signs. The corporate rhetoric continues in the assertion that the body created "becomes the personal property" of the person who assembled it. The notion of the body

as property also has its own historical connotations, not only in the traditional examples of prostitution and slavery, but also in a contemporary moment when body parts, organs, and vital tissue are bought and sold on a black market.¹³ Body parts are also for sale in Bodies© INC, and the more shares the user accrues, the more parts he or she can buy.

Bodies© INC aptly reconstructs the bureaucracy that inspired its inception, drawing attention to bodies threaded through the paperwork of birth and death certificates, census forms, and medical records, and simultaneously emphasizing the necessity and ludicrous limits of creating selfhood through the apparatus of checked boxes and a narrow range of multiple choices. Birth and death are reduced to nothing but the mechanical act of filling out a form—accompanied by the frustration of waiting indefinitely to see the body-object one has created to appear as a visual model in 3D graphics. The process of constructing a body for Bodies© INC sensitizes the user to the categories of identity and identification already standardized in the culture at large.

The administrative forms are a simple black and white, divided into various subsections beginning with a “personal validation” in the form of a name, e-mail address, and password. One must next choose a name for the body to be constructed, then a sex assignment (choices include: female, male, hermaphrodite, other), then a sexual preference (choices include: heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, transsexual, asexual, other), then an age group (any number with three digits or fewer), then body parts. One arrives at the construction of the body after already declaring its attributes. Continuing with the reductionist model maintained throughout, the body is conceived as an object composed of six essential components: a head, torso, left arm, right arm, left leg, and right leg. No logic is given for this decomposition, though it is likely that the design is dependent upon a number of technical constraints as well as conceptual focus. Each body part can be masculine, feminine, infantile, or nonexistent. One could produce a body without a head, for example. Each part can be sized either small, medium, or large, and is finally surfaced by one of twelve textures: black rubber, blue plastic, bronze, clay, concrete, lava, pumice, water, chocolate, glass, or wood (see fig. 4). Vesna contends that the bodies are “constructed from textures, in order to shift the tendency to perceive the project from a strictly sexualized one (as frequently indicated by people’s orders and comments) to a more psychological one (where matters of the mind are actively contemplated and encouraged). Before long, each of the textures is given detailed symbolic meaning.”¹⁴

Bodies© INC thus establishes its own community of bodies with symbolic meaning intimately tied to a surface texture. Given the kinds of images

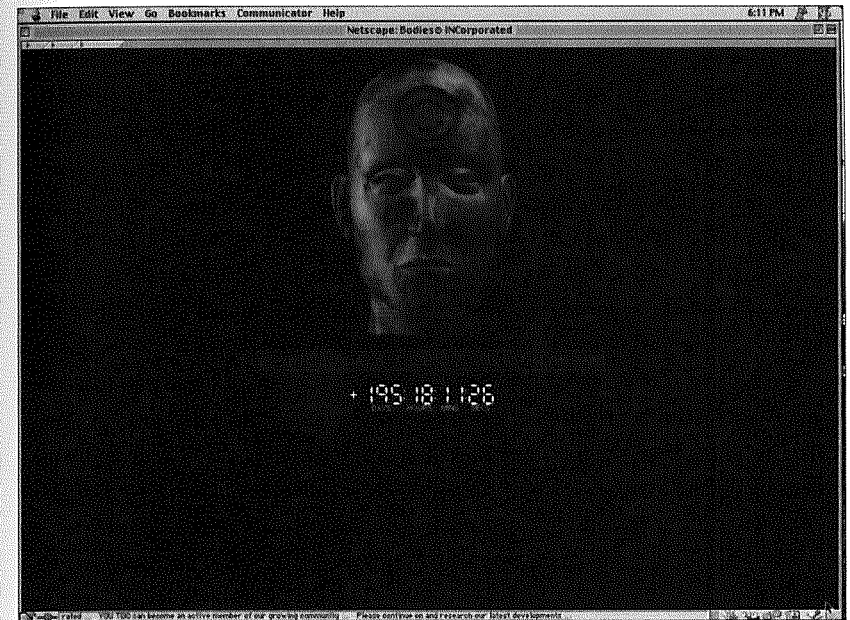


Figure 4 • Bodies© INC

available on the Web, this gesture is probably groundbreaking, though it remains to be seen how successful it is in desexualizing the body, as the representative forms in Bodies© INC are tall and slim and decidedly reflect the Euro-American ideal. Indeed, to construct a fat body or to produce an unusual or monstrous body in this context requires more shares and expertise. Textures are also a convenient solution to the problem of skin color(s). Yet, the progressive potential of a rejection of racial typology falls into its own essentialism when character traits are equated with physical attributes, and limited to a prescribed system of behaviors. Black rubber is hot and dry, sublimates at a relatively low temperature and is a fashion and style element; bronze is hot and cold, hard and wet, very reactive when heated with most substances and is a corporate leader element; clay is cold, dry, and melancholy, it works on subliminal levels to bring out the feminine and is an organizational element; concrete is cold and wet, a powerful desiccating agent that reacts strongly with water and is a business element; lava is hot and dry, conceived as light trapped in matter or perpetual fire and represents a team leader sense; chocolate is sweet and moist, an integrative force that interweaves and balances and is a marketing element, and so on. What emerges from this list is a set of corpo-

rate typologies—the fiery team leader; the melancholy feminine organizer; the dry diplomat; the black, stylish sublimator—that are simultaneously humorous and disturbingly familiar. Familiar because they combine traits that are already linked in the popular preconscious of the culture at large (the melancholy female, the reactive corporate leader) in the form of archetypes or stereotypes. Hybrid figures may also be composed of different elements, perhaps even a schizophrenic set of surfaces that may implicate the body in a set of conflicting power relations. More ironic and sophisticated than those produced in UNDINA, these body textures are still problematic for those who may already be identified as black or bronze.

In addition to a visual body, the user is able to choose from one of twelve sounds that will provide an otherwise mute figure with a kind of vocal presence: breath, geiger, history, nuclear, sine, and voice for example. The sound components are clearly conceived as conceptual signs that function evocatively rather than mimetically. Finally, the user can mark whether the newly designed body functions as an alter ego, a significant other, a desired sexual partner, or “other,” and may add special handling instructions or body descriptions and general comments.

Unlike Mitenev’s UNDINA, Vesna’s Bodies© INC has extensive written documentation on the website that creates a metadiscourse for the user. An essay by Christopher Newfield defines Bodies© INC as a specific kind of corporate structure that

establishes a virtual corporation as an ‘active community’ of participants who choose their own bodily form. The primary activity is the creation of a body in exchange for which the creator is given a share of stock. Corporation B thus exists to express each member’s desire about his or her physical shape. Production serves self-creation. Firm membership formally ratifies expression. These expressions have none of the usual limits: men become women; black becomes white and white becomes brown; flesh turns to clay, plastic, air; clay, plastic, air are attached on one body. Bodies need be neither whole nor have parts that fit.¹⁵

Indeed, this work clearly produces what I have called an appended subject whose limbs and flesh are accessorized, linked to personality traits, and used as values of exchange. The miscegenation of this world is one of hot and cold, wet and dry, mind over matter. But the underlying notion of easily transformed gender and skin color—“men become women; black becomes white and white becomes brown”—more accurately denotes the fantasies inherent in the project.

To her credit Vesna writes, “There is a need for alternate worlds to be built with more complex renditions of identity and community building and not simply replicating the existing physical structures or hierarchies.”¹⁶ She also comments that Bodies© INC is conceived “with the intention of shifting the discourse of the body from the usual idea of flesh and identity. Every member’s body represented is the locus of the contradictions of functioning in the hi-tech environment, while being in the Meta-Body, the Entity in the business of service.”¹⁷ Vesna here maps the internal logic of her own work, criticizing and at the same time reproducing a corporate ontology. Unfortunately, the users of the site do not seem to share her self-conscious take on the function of bodily representations. Lucy Hernandez, quoted in the discussion section of Bodies© INC, writes in May 1997, “I am very pleased to have found your site. I am looking for avatars that can be used in any VRML world. Can my new body leave this site and visit other places? How can I get my new body code? Thanks for making ‘real’ people. I’m tired of being a bird!” What happens to these real people when they are no longer needed? Like the leftover packaging of mass-produced commodities, the bodies created in Bodies© INC are sent to the wasteland of “Necropolis” after their creators chose a method for their death. Never really gone, they haunt the floating world in cold rows of gray geometric blocks. Other bodies circulate and purchase parts at the “Marketplace” (where a *Star Trek* Vulcan head might currently be on sale), or exercise their exhibitionism in “Showplace,” return “Home,” or loiter in “Limbo”. Each domain is a separate VRML world within Bodies© INC that can be navigated with the proper software (see fig. 5).

Sardonic, slick and beautiful, Bodies© INC offers a critical response to a corporate structure and hierarchy—a hierarchy it maintains, despite its claims to the contrary. Its irony is also part of its complicity. And for this group of artists, complicity seems to be the primary mode by which any kind of cultural transformation and critique will take place. Christopher Newfield writes,

There’s no more important change right now than culture recapturing technology—recapturing technology not to reject it but to make culture its partner again as we invent our future, our society, our redemptions. An excellent place to begin is the [corporate] B-form’s recolonization of business power for the artist’s mode of continuous invention business now says it seeks. You will know the recolonization is working when you say, paraphrasing Louis Massiah, “it makes revolution irresistible.”¹⁸

This unlikely mix of neo-Marxist and marketing rhetoric suggests a new critical form for art production. Bodies© INC’s financial sponsors include, among

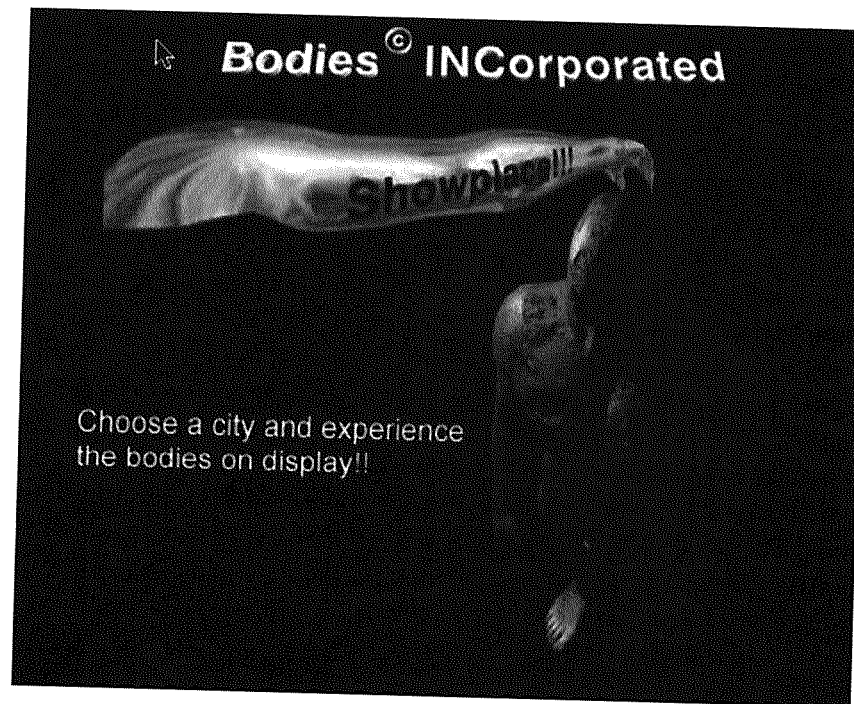


Figure 5 • Bodies© INC

others, Viewpoint Data Labs, Netscape, alias/Wavefront, Silicon Graphics, MetaTools, and Siggraph. It remains to be seen whether a “recolonization” of business power is the most effective method for its critique. Bodies© INC succeeds at least in foregrounding relations among bodies, bureaucracy, and power in a culture based on consumption.

The Global Ideological Apparatus and Getting a Head

The bodies under construction in UNDINA and Bodies© INC populate a built environment of supposedly global proportions. The Internet, when seen as an infinite realm of marketing and promotion, primarily interpellates subjects as consuming bodies, or as subjects in need of appending. Victoria Vesna writes, “One thing is certain—the avatar business is booming. Major companies are investing in creation of online communities and placing their bets on this becoming a ‘virtual entertainment ground.’”¹⁹ She cites Rich Abel, president and CEO of Worlds INC who declares, “Consider this:

a virtual trade show that never closes, complete with booths, displays, product demonstrations, and shows. Or a showroom with operating products on display. Or a virtual visit to a theater, a hotel, or cruise ship. There is no more powerful way to market and promote. What kind of world would you like us to build for you?”²⁰

In writing about the World Wide Web, scholar Joseba Gabilando turns to Louis Althusser’s concept of ideological state apparatuses—conceived as those laws and social institutions that produce concrete individuals *as subjects* through nonrepressive means (church, family, advertising)—in order to elaborate the concept of an ideological global apparatus. Gabilando comments that just as individuals are interpellated as national subjects by the state, cyberspace interpellates individuals as global subjects, hence “cyborg” subjects. But what is the nature of this subjectivity? For Gabilando the interface of cyberspace (as in much of the rest of the world) interpellates the subject primarily as a consumer—not as a citizen, a voter, or a worker. But this new kind of subject position, which at first seems free of cultural specificity, is in fact contingent upon the very differences it appears to overcome. As Gabilando comments,

Postcolonial subject positions are necessary in order to create the outsideness that cyberspace and consumer culture need to constitute themselves as the new hegemonic inner spaces of postmodernism. [...] In a time when multinational capitalism can simulate multiculturalism, nevertheless race, gender, ethnicity and sexuality still function as forms of discrimination and oppression.²¹

Indeed, it is often argued that the problems of racial discrimination are miraculously overcome in the process of the creation of new subjects and new bodies online. In a tone similar to that taken by Christopher Newfield, Bruce Damer in his recent book *Avatars!* writes, “One of the best features about life in digital space is that your skin color, race, sex, size, religion or age does not matter; neither...[do] academic degrees you have.”²² This naive yet pervasive notion that subjects who are online are able to leave behind the very social categories that define them in the “real world” misunderstands the complexity of human subjects who inevitably enact and perform their new identities through the sign systems they already inhabit, and through which they are already interpellated. It would be equally naive to suggest that subjects are somehow not also powerfully *shaped by* the images and activities that take place for them online. Indeed, the distinction between real and artificial is not

in the least useful when attempting to address the kind of subjects that are created in the "interfacial" moment of body/avatar construction. Althusser's claim that ideology interpellates subjects by mimesis or mirroring (we identify with those who look like, or otherwise reflect, us) is replaced in Gabilando's account with interpellation by subject position.

The postmodern Ideological Apparatuses do not interpellate individuals through a process of mimetic reflection in which individuals identify themselves as subjects but rather as through a process of interfacing in which individuals identify their subject positions. The individual is interpellated only as the subject who takes part in a specific interfacing.²³

Since the "global condition" does not exist as such (we do not *function* globally but only locally, always defined through an interface with a machine that *seems* to be spatially infinite) the subject becomes conceived as a subject *position* within a matrix of other signs of exchange, a location within cyberspace, in short an e-mail address, a URL, a credit card number. Yet Gabilando also ignores the possibility that, with online visual representations of bodies (not to mention the complexity of textual exchange), there continues to be a mimetic element to the interface and to ideology. I am interested in this slippage between the idea of interpellation through *mimesis* and by location or *position*. For it seems that these are both at stake in online virtual worlds and in the kind of play with bodily assemblage inherent in UNDINA and Bodies© INC. The user is called upon to identify with bodies visually presented, to find a reflection of subjectivity there, as well as to retain a position outside of this body, a kind of transcendent position that guarantees the meaning of this electronic appendage.

In a section entitled "Gender-bending, Race-shifting, and Generally Not Being Yourself" Bruce Damer continues, "Part of the most thrilling and enticing aspect of the virtual experience is to live the fantasy of being another person."²⁴ That there is power in such fantasy is undeniable. Psychoanalysis offers the most nuanced vocabulary for understanding the relations between identification and desire, and in particular the states of mind through which the subject assembles the fragmented material and linguistic elements that comprise an identity. While I do not attempt to offer a psychoanalytic or symptomatic reading here, I will note that the fantasy of being an "Other" person, represented in a visual form, is a scenario familiar to those scholars who find in the Lacanian mirror stage a model for the formation of subjectivity and the production of ego ideals. The process of bodily construction, of being an Other, in the context of UNDINA or Bodies© INC or some of the other avatar construction sites, has the function of

a secondary revision, a reversal of narrative, a double reconstruction. Rather than an infantile body-in-pieces searching for a unifying device in an external, mimetic reflection, the supposedly unified subject (at the keyboard) seeks to reconstruct subjectivity through a new fragmentation and reconstitution of body parts. Once again, the body becomes the site where identity is reshaped—all the elements of cultural difference, of individual character are assumed to be imbedded in visual signs that stand for flesh. In his essay entitled "Chance Encounters," Victor Burgin cites Sandor Ferenczi's observations concerning the function of the body as an apparatus for understanding the world:

Thus arise those intimate connections, which remain throughout life, between the human body and the objective world that we call *symbolic*. On the one hand the child in this stage sees in the world nothing but images of his corporeality, on the other he learns to represent by means of his body the whole multifariousness of the outer world.²⁵

If such forms of representation in childhood shape the symbolic construction of the world in adulthood, then reconstruction of the body as an adulthood rite is hardly an insignificant event in the course of subject formation. True, in the case of UNDINA and Bodies© INC the end result is still a fantasy of coherence, but a coherence borrowed from a variety of sources. Moreover, the threat of difference (cultural, sexual) is, once again, overcome, not only as a fetish in the form of a stereotype, but now in the projection of one's own subjectivity into or onto that very difference. Race is understood not to "matter" precisely because the conditions of power that produce racism are not, in this online domain, perceived as under any kind of threat from the material realm cyberspace supposedly escapes. Bodies are conceived as products of bureaucracy, and hence largely as property, and the idea of not being oneself is intimately tied to the conditions of leisure and the activity of consumption. The fantasy of an "outside" of the system, the multicultural or postcolonial bodies that Gabilando identifies as the boundaries to a privileged cyberspace, are brought inside literally for the sake of appearances. That the ability to consume and dissect these very bodies, that to have a fantasy of the body in pieces, might be an activity of privilege is never addressed. Only in the absence of history and with a blindness to those cultural contexts where bodies are already dismembered through political torture, and in which racial identities are fraught with a history of violent, forced miscegenation can one imagine such fantasies operating freely. And, of course, they do operate in the neocolonial rhetoric of a global interface.

Randy Farmer, one of the creators of the early virtual world *Habitat*, writes,

In *Habitat* the primary way to change your appearance is by changing your head. You can buy new styles of head from a vending machine in the local "Head Shop", or you might win a unique head in a contest sponsored by the service administrator.... [eventually] there is nothing left to buy except the special one-of-a-kind prize heads. As a result, these rare heads trade for hundreds of times the price of the others. Without a doubt, the dominant symbol of wealth and stature in the Habitats is a large collection of unique heads, proudly on display in your virtual living room.²⁶

The consumption of identity is here made explicit in the form of a competitive trophy exhibition. The more identities one displays, the more status one accrues. An individual user becomes identified with multiple subject positions through collecting and disguise. Given the interdependent histories of colonialism and collecting (especially for museums of anthropology), it is worth asking *who* is collecting *whom* online, and whose bodies are on display.

Transcendental Subjects Embodied

Embedded in fantasies of collecting body specimens and creating hybrid subjects is a matrix of desire that seeks to absorb or orchestrate cultural differences. The racial, ethnic, or gender hybrid is usually read as a break with the traditional Enlightenment concept of the unified individual.

Joseph Nechvatal writes that in Bodies© INC "[t]he digit-body is a motif—a trope—of the entirety of the self, and in its numericalization of the body is the site of and metaphor for the disintegration of the modern notion of the self."²⁷ By offering an image of a body in pieces and made up of pieces, the Bodies© INC site, Nechvatal suggests, rejects the transcendental, universal, timeless self of modern European philosophy.²⁸ Instead, a postmodern subject is expressly evoked, a subject able to be represented by discontinuous elements, entirely present in electronic form. The model of a subject, somehow not essentialized into fixed categories such as male/female, black/white, natural/artificial—is, in the works discussed here, given a utopian status as a kind of miscegenation of elements that—legitimate or illegitimate—stands as a figure of possible future identification. At the same time, however, a narrow or ahistorical conception of hybridity (found in UNDINA and Bodies© INC)

threatens to reproduce a new "transcendental" subject that floats through cyberspace, supposedly free from social constraints while nevertheless perpetuating a familiar social hierarchy. Because it is refreshing and exciting to see an effort on the part of artists and theorists to move beyond essentializing notions of subjectivity, and because there is a progressive element in efforts to map cultural hybridity, it is all the more imperative that such important efforts be examined for the ways in which they unwittingly perpetuate the very stereotypes they may be attempting to subvert.

Problems arise primarily when cultural identity or self-representation is equated with a configuration of body parts. Each appendage becomes the sign of a different race, ethnicity, natural element, character trait. The assumption that this electronic body might somehow inhabit a privileged space because of this multiplicity—a universal translator with interchangeable parts—reenacts an equally romantic notion of the mulatto or mestizo as someone able to inhabit more than one cultural paradigm as a result of phenotype. Here hybridity is a matter of visible traits or stereotyped morphologies, not, as in Homi Bhabha's analysis, "inscribed as a historical narrative of alterity that explores forms of social antagonism and contradiction that are not yet properly represented, political identities in the process of being formed, cultural enunciations in the act of hybridity, in the process of translating and transvaluing cultural differences."²⁹ Other scholars have also emphasized the importance of dissociating the conception of a complex, transcultural politics, with a reduction to corporal signifiers. Chela Sandoval suggests that a "cyborg consciousness" is able to avoid the forms of control that plague the reified or immobile subject by taking steps such as deconstruction, appropriation, and differential movement to disrupt the hold of a hegemonic culture over individual subjects. For Sandoval this model of an oppositional or differential position, akin to "U.S. third world feminism" and "*mestizaje*" is produced through a series of concrete *practices* that can never be reduced to a type of *body*. Instead, the nonessentialized subject for her becomes identifiable through a map of possible *action*.³⁰

For Bodies© INC it is the construction of a body that performs the process of identity formation. The different appendages and their accompanying bureaucratic data are what constitute the character of the subject depicted. In UNDINA the process is even more simple, as it relies on a simple grid of interchangeable parts, without even the pretense of action or choice. By representing a shifting locus for a distributed subject—radical in the sense that it is perhaps shifting and changing, living, dying and nonessentialized—the

appended subject in the form of an online body also defines a relation to a so-called global interface as primarily one of consumption, not opposition.

Nestor Garcia-Canclini has written,

For my part, I think that the fragmentary and scattered view of the experimentalists or postmodernists appears with a double meaning. It can be an opening, an occasion for again feeling uncertainties, when it maintains the critical preoccupation with social process, with artistic languages and with the relations that these weave with society. On the other hand, if this is lost, the postmodern fragmentation is converted into an artistic imitation of the simulacra of atomization that a market—in fact monopolistic and centralized—plays with dispersed consumers.³¹

As works of art, UNDINA and Bodies© INC fall somewhere between these two models of postmodernism. If the transcendental subject of an enlightenment reason was a unified, predictable subject that could only be imagined because of a homogeneous cultural context, and if the postmodern subject emerged from a recognition of, among other things, a complex heterogeneous cultural context, then these two art works enact the *return* of a transcendental subject as an *endlessly appendable subject*. What the creation of this appended subject presupposes is the possibility of a new cosmopolitanism constituting all the necessary requirements for a global citizen who speaks multiple languages, inhabits multiple cultures, wears whatever skin color or body part desired, elaborates a language of romantic union with technology or nature, and moves easily between positions of identification with movie stars, action heroes, and other ethnicities or races. It is precisely through an experimentation with cultural and racial fusion and fragmentation, combined with a lack of attention to social process, a lack of attention to history, and a strange atomization of visual elements that a new transcendental, universal, and, above all, consuming subject is offered as the model of future cyber-citizenship.

Political or ethical choice is reduced to the consumption and incorporation of new appendages to the body. When these appendages are “racialized” a new form of colonization takes place on the level of symbolic exchange. UNDINA and Bodies© INC offer one view into this global ideological apparatus and serve as a reminder that human bodies continue to be the material and visible form through which human subjectivities are defined and contested today, despite the now popular belief in cyberspace as the ultimate realm of disembodiment.

Notes

1. See the writings of Allucquère Rosanne Stone, Julian Dibbell, Steven Jones, Anne Balsamo, Mark Dery, and others.
2. Homi Bhabha, “The Other Question.”
3. Written e-mail comments to the author, January, 1998.
4. Ibid.
5. Donna Haraway, “Monkey Puzzle,” 42.
6. Evelyn M. Hammonds, “New Technologies of Race,” 109, 118.
7. Margaret Morse, *Virtualities: Television, Media Art and Cyberculture*, 96.
8. Jennifer González, “Envisioning Cyborg Bodies.”
9. Barbara Maria Stafford, *Body Criticism*, 264.
10. Victoria Vesna, Bodies© INCorporated.
11. Ibid.
12. Some theorists of cyberspace see a new philosophical potential in the ability of computers to convert symbols into deeds. However, I would side with Mark Dery in his observation that “while the disembodied sociology of BBSs may treat descriptions as actions, the most significant exchange of symbols in cyberspace—the global, often computer-assisted traffic in currency, junk bonds, information, and other immaterial commodities—*accentuates* rather than eliminates the ‘division of the world into the symbolic and the real.’” (emphasis original) Mark Dery, *Escape Velocity*, 68–69. The division is, of course, always an artificial one, as the “real” is always also symbolic.
13. See Anthony Beadie, “Body-Parts Black Market on Rise, Film Says.” Cited in Dery.
14. Vesna, Bodies© INCorporated.
15. Christopher Newfield, Essay, Bodies© INCorporated.
16. Victoria Vesna, Genealogy, Bodies© INCorporated.
17. Ibid.
18. Newfield.
19. Vesna, Bodies© INCorporated.
20. Rich Abel, Worlds INC, 1996, cited in Vesna, Ibid.
21. Joseba Gabilando, “Postcolonial Cyborgs,” 424, 429.
22. Bruce Damer, *Avatars!* 136.
23. Gabilando, “Cyborgs,” 428.
24. Ibid., 132.
25. Sandor Ferenczi, cited in Victor Burgin, *In/Different Spaces*, 97–98.
26. F. Randall Famer, *Habitat Citizenry*.
27. Joseph Nechvatal, Genealogy, Bodies© INCorporated.
28. Nechvatal writes, quoting Robert C. Solomon, “The self in question is no ordinary self, no individual personality, nor even one of the many heroic or mock-heroic personalities of the early nineteenth century. The self that became the star performer in modern European philosophy is the transcendental self, or transcendental ego, whose nature and ambitions were unprecedentedly arrogant, presumptuously cosmic, and consequently mysterious. The transcendental self was the self—timeless, universal, and in each one of us around the globe and throughout history.” (Robert C. Solomon, *Continental Philosophy since 1750*, 4). The body in Bodies© INCorporated then is a negative space denoting the bodies former presence.”
29. Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*.
30. See Chela Sandoval, “New Sciences.”
31. Nestor Garcia-Canclini, *Hybrid Cultures*, 280.

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4. The Revenge of the Yellowfaced Cyborg Terminator

The Rape of Digital Geishas and the Colonization of Cyber-Coolies in 3D Realms' Shadow Warrior

Jeffrey A. Ow

Listen. Understand. That Terminator is out there. It can't be reasoned with, it can't be bargained with...it feels no pity or remorse or fear... and it absolutely will not stop. Ever. Until you are dead.

Reese, *The Terminator*, 1984

In the Orwellian-prophesied year 1984, a foreboding *The Terminator* propelled Arnold Schwarzenegger to superstardom. Super Mario soldiers began their Asian invasion in 1986, as their 8-bit video game console implanted Nintendo narratives within the minds of red-blooded American youth. Yet neither by movie nor game, constructed neither of masculine metal nor transnational marketing, Donna Haraway's seminal *Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s*, crafted in 1985, heralded the age of the (academic) cyborg. Writing in the temporal center of an American Reaganism, where technology-laden militarized buildups resurrected binary paradigms of good and evil, Haraway built a theoretical cyborg capable of navigating the domestic Evil Empire. She explained,