ONLY
SKIN
DEEP
CHANGING VISIONS OF THE AMERICAN SELF
MORPHOLOGIES

Race as a Visual Technology

As recording devices, the medium of photography has always been allied with truth claims: as evidence in courts of law, as the necessary supplement to historical narratives, as the existential proof for the passing of time, or as the unquestioned framework for what might be called the family romance. Historians and theorists have engaged critically with this "truth effect" of photography for over a century, assessing the cultural investment in the intangible quality of the image and the connotations of naturalism that it implicates. And nearly every generation of artists has found the interrogation or dismantling of this "truth effect" to be a primary means to engage the medium.

Yet, with every new form of photographic image production, whether analog or digital, a cry goes out in the name of "truth" against subversive forms of manipulation or deception. This cry usually issues from those whose faith in documentary and journalistic image production has not yet been shaken, or from those who hold fast to a belief in the strategic deployment of visual evidence for the sake of larger political and historical concerns. As family snapshots, work-related information exchange, or artistic medium, the easily circulated, digitally produced image no longer has the aura of the new or—perhaps more importantly—the authentic. In this context of mass image production and exchange, questions of verisimilitude seem每年 out of date. By the mid-nineties a number of anthologies and exhibition catalogues, notably The Photographic Image in Digital Culture (1998) and Photography After Photography: Memory and Representation in the Digital Age (1999)—offered cogent analyses of the domain of digital photography and its cultural context. Scholars and artists agreed that digital photography is no less and no more susceptible to falsification than its analog counterpart. Similarly, many found that technological or material differences in the new medium do little to change the social effect and cultural function of "realist" images and their "truth effect."

In the era of digital photography and digital art, a photograph is not only anything that looks like a photograph but also anything that acts like a photograph irrespective of its production as a photographic effect. Of course, just as both historians and practitioners know, the truth effect of photography has real consequences—even when the image lies. Photography, as the exhibition makes clear, played and still plays a central role in the maintenance of a discourse of visibility and the norms it prescribes. This is its rhetorical power and its ideological advantage.

When considering the history of photography and the history of race discourse, it becomes apparent not only that these two histories are intimately interdependent but also that a conceptual parallel exists.

nancy born, from major cases. ida shuster, a caucasian, and a black, from the "masaik" series, 1882. selenium silver print, 8 x 10 in. lativa, Courtesy of the artist and Yossi Milo Gallery, New York.
between the "truth effects" of photography and what might be called the "truth effects" of race. Both kinds of "truth effects" naturalize ideological systems by making them visible and, apparently, self-evident. As with photography, the visual or visible elements of race function to produce truth effects that appear natural. In her essay for this catalogue, Coo Fusco has argued persuasively that there is no visual truth about race. But it is also the case that concepts of race and ethnicity have historically been inseparable from a discourse of display and from the logic of vision. Skin color, hair color, and eye color become marking devices for those who seek to situate the galactic history of humans within the narrow confines of phenotype. Race has always been a profoundly visual rhetoric, evidence of which can be found in the complex vocabularies developed to denote social hierarchies based on variations in skin color and phenotype over the last few centuries.

In the Americas, for example, sexual reproduction became the site in which the normative condition of hybridity and miscegenation gave rise to a powerfully hierarchical caste system subsequently codified in the arts. In New Spain (Mexico) of the eighteenth century, the tradition of caste paintings codified the visual effects of racial mixing by depicting racially distinct parents along with their mestizo children. Each painting is inscribed with the ethnic or racial make-up of the mother, the father, and the children, for example, "A Spanish father and an African mother produce a Mestizo child." The categories were elaborate and precise, including variations such as the criollo, mestizo, negrito, mulato, moreno, sayula, labio, zambo, and tosto azor, among others. Given the passion for scientific categorisation during the Enlightenment and the colonial imperative for an artificial means of marking class structure, this elaborate codification is not surprising. Rendered in paint it becomes a striking example of the deep desire to produce a partial visual tabulation of racial hybridity and its physical characteristics. The very concept that a body possesses or reveals a color is indebted to the privileging of vision and its attendant systems of representation that measure and quantify the subtle differences of skin hue and tone. Of course, this desire to map the visible characteristics of race in a hierarchical taxonomy recurs in photography under the guise of eugenics and now reappears in the automated morphing technologies applied to digital images.

It becomes clear when looking at these and other historical precedents that race has long been an importantly visual system of power whose parameters have been the focus of every innovation in visual recording devices. As with photography, the visual "truth effect" of race has also played an important role, socially and culturally, as the necessary supplement to historical narratives, as existential evidence,
or as the unquestioned framework for the family romance. And as with photography, the visual truth about race has very real consequences even if the "facts" about race as a category or discourse reveal it to be primarily an ideological construction.

The concept and lived experience of race are entwined in a discourse of visibility that enables subsequent forms of hierarchy or oppression to become naturalized, that enables membership in communities to be established, and that enables categorical distinctions to become natural. In Against Race, Paul Gilroy notes, “Cognition of ‘race’ was never an exclusively linguistic process and involved from its inception a distinctive visual and optical imaginary. The sheer plenitude of racialized images and icons communicates something about the forms of difference these discourses summoned into being.”

Race, in all its historical complexity, is not an invention of visual culture but, among the ways in which race as a system of power is elaborated as both evident and anti-evident, its visual articulation is one of the most significant.

This essay examines the work of contemporary artists who explore the history and maintenance of the visual discourse of race through digital art practice—particularly but not exclusively digital photography.

**Morphology**

Despite—and perhaps because of—its historical links to eugenics and the delimiting of racial and criminal types, the composite photograph inherited from the experiments of Francis Galton in the nineteenth century has been the focus of exploration and transformation by contemporary artists working in the tradition of portraiture. Nancy Burson’s composite photographs of the 1980s offered a new kind of visual typology by overlaying facial features of cinema stars or politicians to highlight their common traits, or by creating imaginary visual correlates to numerical statistics. Her 1984 image *Mesoamerica* is a composite portrait of three faces weighted according to demographic information about a world population that was 25 percent Oriental, 1 percent Black and 75 percent White. Three "typical" faces are presented as an anonymous computational portrait of a single individual and its collapses of normally distinct racial categories was intended as an anti-racist gesture, but Burson’s effort nevertheless comes across as strangely anachronistic.

In fact, the line between the critique of racial typologies and their reproduction is one that is difficult to draw in Burson’s work. Her recent project, the *Human Race Machine* (2002), combines a sophisticated, viewing-booth apparatus with a "patented technology" that will transform the user’s photographic image using one of four different...
algorithms: Age Machine, Anonymity Machine, Couples Machine, and Human Race Machine. One has the choice of aging one’s face, adding disfigurements, combining one’s face with another person’s, or seeing oneself with the facial characteristics of six different races. Burson claims that the Human Race Machine is her “prey for racial equality” and suggests, “there is only one race, the human one.” Presenting the argument that “there is no gene for race” the Human Race Machine allows the user to engage in what Lisa Nakamura might call “identity tourism. Nakamura writes, “Identity tourism is a type of nonreflective relationship that actually widens the gap between the other and the one who only performs itself as the other in the medium of cyberspace.” Burson’s machine takes a picture of the user and then digitally adjusts bone structure, skin tone, and eye shape in order to achieve a range of racially marked facial features. “The more we recognize ourselves in others,” Burson writes, “the more we can connect to the human race.” The artist also claims, “The Human Race Machine allows us to move beyond differences and arrive at sameness.” Despite her good intentions, I want to ask, who counts as “us”? Is sameness really where “we” want to arrive? Despite Burson’s promise of greater human sameness, the Human Race Machine appears to offer satisfaction for a thinly veiled fantasy of difference. As form of temporary racial tourism Burson’s machine may make the process of intra-racial identification appear plausible, but its artificiality does nothing to change how people live their lives or understand their historical condition.

The technology used by Burson is based on earlier experiments in digital morphing seen first by the mainstream public in Michael Jackson’s music video “Black or White” where he sings:

It’s a turf war on a global scale
I rather have both colors
of the world, it’s not about races (Just places)

Races: Where your blood comes from is your space
I’ve seen the bright side down
my life being a color [...]
I said if you’re thinkin’ of being my baby
It don’t matter if you’re black or white
I said if you’re thinkin’ of being my brother
It don’t matter if you’re black or white [...]

Throughout the video Jackson’s own face morphs in quick, smooth and seamless succession into the faces of men and women of different “races.” The uncanny visual transitions are both disturbing and fascinating. One face transforms into the next as if undergoing a physical metamorphosis in which skin and bone are stretched and molded, hair and eyes grow and change. Although each person and racial type appears distinct from the next, the video also suggests that a melding, mixing, or hybridization is taking place in real time—a transformation...
that appears to be entirely the result of the power of the image apparatus As Peter Lunenfeld suggests, "As we move into the digital, the aesthetics of form become more and more involved in the aesthetics of mutable form." Morphing quickly became a popular graphical technique in digital image processing, because of the seemingly magical way the computational remix of images provided the truth effect of a real photograph. Donna Haraway, writing about Morph 2.0 by Syphon Software designed for the personal computer, suggests "This technology has proved irresistible in the United States for 1990s mass cultural, racialized kinship discourse on human unity and diversity." The truth effect of photography not only visually demonstrated but also mechanically reinforced the truth effect of race through an automated process of digital genesis. In the fall of 1993 the canonical image of this renaissance emerged on the cover of Time magazine, for its special issue on "How immigrants are shaping the world's first multicultural society." "Take a good look at this woman," reads the text on the cover next to the face of a young woman, "She was created by a computer from a mix of several races.


What you see is a remarkable preview of... "The New Face of America." Responding to this image, Haraway writes, "In an odd computerized updating of the typological categories of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the programmer who gave birth to SimEve and her many siblings generated the ideal racial synthesis, whose only possible existence is in the matrices of cyberspace." Also serving as an ideological reprise of the caste paintings from New Spain nearly four centuries later, Time magazine's new technological hybrid apparently neutralizes the hierarchies of the past with an artificial, clinical birth in the present, implying that computation is the proper locus and mode of a new racial mixing. In this Pan-American fantasy, Haraway argues, the microchip and the computer program displace the human being as the origin of life.

Such creative aims to reformulate the human body abound in digital photography, some celebratory and others explicitly critical. Azzu Cuderman's "Dystopia" series of portraits in which human heads are devoid of any expressive feature or one's represents a loss of personal identity that occurs as a result of new forms of digital communication. The artist writes that "With the erosion of the primary facial features—eyes, nose, mouth, etc.—we intend to suggest an evolutionary change, representing the loss of individuality in the face of advancing technology and the progressive disappearance of human interaction." Looking like unknown creatures in a fetal state, the portraits they construct are disturbingly blank yet remarkably individual. They illicit the uncanny, eerie sensation of seeing a body caught in the tragic limits of genetic error. The unfinished subject, the underdeveloped social and sensory apparatus, signals the emptiness of the body as a signifier in a world of digitally mediated communication.

Similarly disturbing are the works of Iraan van Lamsweerde whose stick fashion portraits use digital graphics to unsettle expectations of both gender and age, addressing the sexual politics that makes us read bodies as desirable or unattractive. Smooth bodies without orifices, the hands, lips, and eyes of men, women, and children compiled into a single portrait offers a dreamlike condition of a forbidden unconscious imaginary. "Using the computer to code plastic surgery," writes Colin Schorr, "van Lamsweerde one-ups the practices of beautification, suggesting that our preoccupation with perfection brings us close to science fiction. She also mimics a male desire to mother by producing a race technologically rather than physically." Schorr also implies that by working exclusively with "white" bodies, Van Lamsweerde reveals a white aesthetic that oppressive or not becomes a Western European default for "mestizaje." She suggests that "Despite their perfect dimensions, her figures are blank, apona..."
their Philip Pearlstein Caucasian flesh humming like a human doomsday machine.\footnote{M. Franklin Simmons, "Bet a Little Dinner," Artforum Reviews, December 10, 1988.}

Paul Pfeiffer's Leviathan references whiteness differently. In a digital Chromogenic print, the artist delineates the floor plan of a cathedral in a shimmering outline of pink plastic doll flesh sprouting shiny abundant waves of golden hair. As if rising from a sea or carpet of platinum tresses, this architecturally morphed close-up image of the heads of Matter dolls looks like a wound or a scar branded on the skin.\footnote{M. Franklin Simmons, "Bet a Little Dinner," Artforum Reviews, December 10, 1988.}

Leviathan is a Biblical beast, a many-headed serpent that represents a mythical monster eventually slain by the sword of Job. Also the title of Thomas Hobbes's philosophical account of the state's rule over the ills of human nature, Leviathan in Pfeiffer's work seems to imply the dynamics of colonial and missionary culture that have ruled over others through ideological and racial domination. Originally exhibited in a solo show called "The Pure Products Go Crazy," Pfeiffer's Leviathan incites Christianity to notions of extreme purity, whether moral or racial.
which have finally reached a condition of corruption. Much of Pfaffner's work engages the complex layers of human relations that are at the nexus of mass culture, race, and religious culture in the United States. His use of digital photography produces a shift in the materiality of the visual tropes of race, extending beyond the human body to include the history of architecture and other domains of social space in a literally squinting skin with architecture. Pfaffner seeks us to consider the kinds of "pattern language" produced in the historical relations between bodies, religion, and the mapping of space.

Color balance

Technologies of visual art such as photography, film, and video have been mutually constitutive with conceptions of race. It is possible to observe this fact by tracing how technologies of image-making have been invented and adapted to the purpose of better elaborating or accommodating racial discourses. Racial hierarchy informs the design and use of these technologies, and in turn racial discourse is articulated and defined by them. This feedback loop is rarely acknowledged in studies of the history of photography and other visual media despite the fact that visual recording devices have never been racially neutral. Artist François Buecher's recent digital video work White Balance that ties the condition of racial privilege and the production of visual culture in mass media to the politics of global, economic domination, brilliantly illustrates this fact. His title derives from the process by which the digital pixels in the recording device are automatically balanced for the color white. Although the balance is based on the color spectrum, the notion of white balance in Buecher's work refers to white skin color as simultaneously a cultural and technological default in the United States. It is possible to see how the tradition of photography might be similarly "balanced." Even on a superficial level, the culture of photographic practice is understood to be shaped by the technical capabilities of the medium. New York Institute of Photography's "Tips for Better Photographers" claims, "There is probably no question in portraiture that is more confusing to beginning photographers than how to photograph people with black skin." If black skin makes "confusion" it is because neither the original design of the apparatus, nor common techniques for its use have taken blackness, or other non-white skin colors as a standard.

Skin, with all its registers of meaning for the history of race, has also become the focus of questions of color and code in digital art practices. Alida D'Urbano, a Italian artist, used digital imaging techniques available in 1986 to produce a life-sized photographic representation of her own body. Printed on a tailla's pattern, the resulting
output was used to create a wearable suit of her own "skin." She writes, "The thought of being able to slip out of my own skin for a moment and offer it to another person gave rise to the idea of making a suit out of my own two-dimensional image. This suit would offer others the opportunity, as it were, of walking through the world hidden 'under the skin' of the artist." Throughout the discussion of identity and representation in photography, D'Urso aimed to address the idea of the body as an image reduced to a passive shell. Digital photography acts in the service of a costume that "defines the contour of the image which forms on the retina of another person." D'Urso's project grapples with the degree to which the subject is always an image for another, and tries to literally slip out of this skin—this image—and imagine it as little more than a costume for exchange.

In a very different kind of project that engaged a parallel discourse, artist Keith Townsend placed a series of personal photographs on the commercial auction website eBay in August 2001. Although the...
work makes reference to the history of slavery when black bodies stood on public auction blocks. Obadina is careful not to equate his cultural Blackness (with a capital "B") with a black body, even if this referrent is part of its etymology. By not including a photograph, Obadina thwarts the common expectation that objects for sale on eBay will be visible on line—further underscoring the difference between the concept of Blackness and skin color. Using the actual eBay site, the artist described the object for sale stating that this "hairloom has been in the possession of the seller for twenty-eight years" and that it "may be used for creating black art,... writing critical essays or scholarship about other blacks,... dating a black person without fear of public scrutiny," and, among other rights, "securing the right to use the terms 'africa,' 'afro,' or 'nigga' in reference to black people." Certain warnings also apply, for example the Seller does not recommend that this Blackness be used "during legal proceedings of any sort,... while making intellectual claims,... while voting in the United States of America," or "try whites looking for a ways weekend." Obadina toys with the idea that Blackness is a commodity that can be bought and sold for the purpose of cultural passing, tapping into a long-standing fantasy in the history of race politics of crossing the "color line." But the artist also writes, "This Blackness may be used to augment the blackness of those already black, especially for purposes of playing 'blacker-than-thou,'" structured around the perceived desires of others to occupy or "own" Blackness even if they are already black. Obadina's project brings out the hierarchies operative in cultural conceptions of racial identities while revealing the social inequities that always attend Blackness in the United States.

The playful seriousness of Obadina's work raises the question of how race and color are bought and sold in the digital domain of the Internet. Preema Murthy's Bindi Girl is one example of sites that raise the question of how pornography operates as one of the more obvious forms of commodification of bodies that are based on fantasies of racial specificity or difference. Using effectively censored images from an actual porn site, the artist leads the user through a series of links that simultaneously entice and thwart the user's potential desire for the body of a South Asian woman. The love that turns into a narrative form of unsuccessful court, the auctioneer-one can purchase are banned items like knee socks or bindi dots, and the live cam is inoperative. The Bindi Girl says, "At first I thought technology would save me, arm me with my weapons. Then I turned to religion. But both have let me down. They continue to keep me confined to my "proper" place." The text on the Bindi Girl site implies that for the South Asian woman in a Hindu culture, this "proper" place is either a goddess or whore, the limited
range ascribed by a traditionally sexist cultural framework in the context of a looming new high-tech economy. India's GVT is Murthy's recursive critique of the absurdity of this endless and apparently closed dialectic of positions. By taking up the common graphics and participatory tropes of porn sites, Murthy reiterates the form in order to play out the absurdity of its limits.

In another web site parody, Tara Hargast's digital project, Bitter Nigger Broadcast Network (2000), offers a humorous and scathingly critical take on the wages of racism in the contemporary United States. Presented in the graphically sophisticated language of high-end web design, the BNBN satirizes both television broadcasting networks and corporate home pages that offer special products and services. Soft and seductive soundtracks and glowing pastel logos lead the user through a series of items to purchase in the BNB Pharmaceutical line: or the BNB Product Division, both "committed to alleviating the bothersome effects of racism." BNB Pharmaceutical lists among its products McVindon, a Negro Teflon medical lotion, whose "soothing protection" and "gentle yet powerful shielding technology" bonds with the pigmentation of the skin, protecting the wearer from the damaging effects of racial remarks and behavior that subsequently slide right off Tommen, designed for younger clients, helps them to "achieve a level of complacency normally reached after years of deferred dreams and smashed hopes—but without the bitterness." The user is informed by a pleasant voice that by suppressing feelings, Tommen effectively removes the yearning for fairness or human decency.

If medication don't do the trick, the Product Division recommends the Hello-Pal who, like a genie out of a bottle, can be made to materialize when the black user needs a white male friend to provide a legitimizing image during retail shopping, at the bank, purchasing a home, or even developing an art career. The Hello-Pal becomes a "passport image" that allows the user to avoid discrimination in encounters with others. Parodying the advertising language that accompanies many new electronic devices, Hargast fouts the compatibility of the Hello-Pal with other daily planning technologies such as PDAs, suggesting that the new holographic device can be programmed to anticipate the needs of the user. With its self-conscious title, the Bitter Nigger Broadcast Network gives its users with humor while reweaving the tautness of systematic racism.

A similar critique of racial inequalities that uses a parody of telephilics can be found in the work of Los Cybrids, a San Francisco based artists group, Los Cybrids has produced installations, videos, and a number of public art projects, performances, and discussions that address the broader social effects of the new technology revolution.
Responding to the economic boom of Silicon Valley with satirical and ominous predictions, their work poses critical questions concerning the race and class distinctions that underlie the fantasy of a wired world. Making use of public billboard space, their Digital Mural Project (2002) served as a public service announcement concerning the role of technology in globalization and in the working lives of Chicanos and Latinos in the Bay Area. Installed outside the Galleria de la Raza in the Mission District of San Francisco, the billboards offered dystopian visions of a future in which the rhetoric of inclusion—"Don't be left behind; last one across the digital divide is a rotten egg"—is shown to be yet another colonizing gesture of capitalism. A different mural announces "El Webotronics: Sistema de Vigilancia." The image depicts a young Latino boy looking toward a future populated with computers, robots, and satellite dishes. His innocent features are marred by a sinister bar code printed across his neck, and his face is framed as if part of a police file. Rather than a bridge to a brighter future, the Internet becomes the new panopticon keeping watch over racial minorities. The mural reads, "...you don't have to be connected to be affected."

Race as a visual technology

In her forthcoming essay "Race as Technology," artist Beth Coleman suggests that race can be understood as a learned mechanism or "a function machine that has already articulated the race-of-technology parameters that one inherited from the age of Enlightenment and the age of rational numbers. Race as technology adopts the role of technicity by using race as a tool." Coleman's concept of race as a technology is compelling precisely because it allows the discourse to be conceived as a series of techniques, rather than a framework.
of ontological conditions. From this perspective, race as a "levered mechanism" can be seen to operate across historical, social, and cultural practices that are geared to carry out operations following a systemic logic.

Some theoreticians have claimed that digital image production is materially different from traditional photography to the degree that it constitutes a formal avant-garde, a revolution in the concept of the image, a new realism for a new reality. While such proclamations are no doubt primarily rhetorical, they signal an interest in the idea that the human population is engaged in a major transition—a digital revolution—that is not merely technological but also phenomenological or even ontological. Our bodies and psyches will become integrated. It is suggested, with systems of information and surveillance, microchips, and nanotechnologies. As genetic engineering turns to the computer for its model of analysis and production of experiments, it joins an effort to understand human beings in terms of the automization that digital technology makes possible. The human body is no longer conceived primarily as a mechanical device with skin, muscles, and bones, but rather as a complex structure of codes that determine microprocesses invisible to the naked eye. Identity and identification become literally more than skin deep when one is defined by genetic codes.

Paul Gilroy writes, "Today skin is no longer privileged as the threshold of either identity or particularity. There are good reasons to suppose that the line between inside and out now falls elsewhere. The boundaries of 'race' have moved across the threshold of the skin. They are cellular and molecular, not dermal. If 'race' is to endure, it will be in a new form, estranged from the scenes respectively associated with political anatomy and epidermalisation." And yet, Gilroy is also quick to point out that despite the fact that science as a discourse has changed the way race is conceived biologically, the brute simplicity of racial typology still stumps itself out in the most basic ways as public forms of violence. For Gilroy it is necessary to find a way to produce an antiracist discourse in which race does not simultaneously perpetuate the replication of race as a legitimate human category.

Some of the art projects discussed here are explicitly critical of race categories, while others are engaged in antiracist politics that rely on the ongoing stability of such categories. In both kinds of projects it seems clear, despite Gilroy's suggestion that racial discourses based on the visual logic of color or "epidermalisation" are no longer legitimate, that the concept of race and its truth effect are still prevalent in a visual nexus, in a racializing gaze that has been historically produced and is now effectively maintained by popular culture as well as the arts. Even if it is possible to imagine a future in which the

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39. Ibid., p. 12.
"technology of race" is no longer an oppressive power of domination. It is also likely that visual difference will play itself out as a necessary supplement to other kinds of social dynamics. If, as Gilroy suggests, racial discourse was "summoned into being," at least in part, by the production of a specific image culture, then it is in image culture that it must be unraveled and undone. What is required is to recognize that race is, among other things, a visual technology consisting of a complex web of intersexual mechanisms tying the present to the past through new and familiar systems of representation. Artists such as those mentioned here explore the intersexuality to better situate the visual frameworks for race in a digital age, or to point to their social and political effects. At the same time, as image-makers, the artists are in the process of producing the next generation of visual technologies of race. When looking at these and other contemporary works that engage race as a discourse, we should consider to what degree they continue its historical logic or enact its progressive transformation.

Kurt Hirschhorn, Painted in 1998, Oil on wood panel, 47 x 32 in, 119.4 x 81.3 cm. Courtesy of The Project, New York.