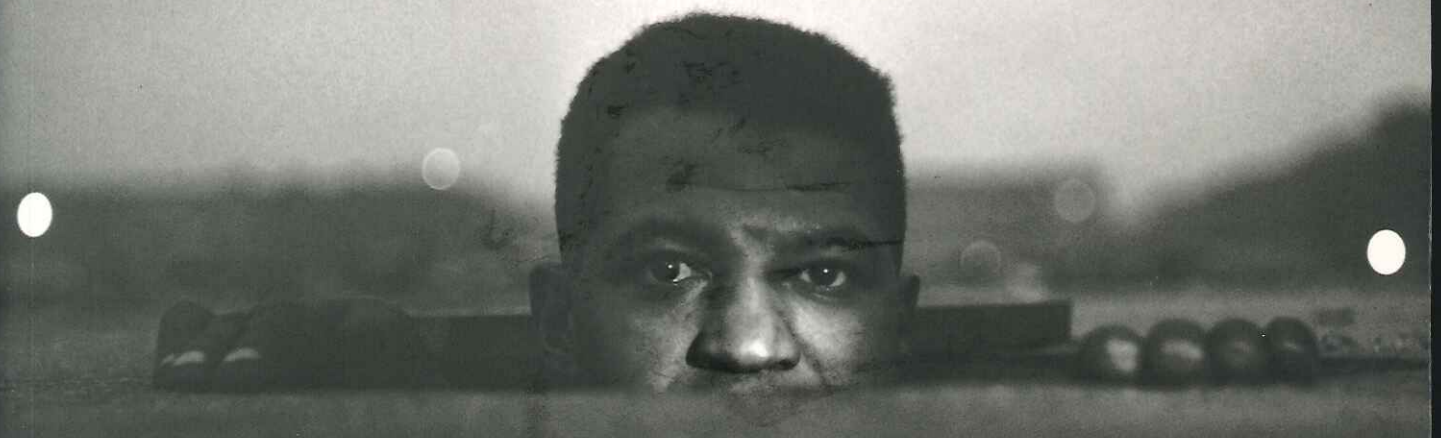
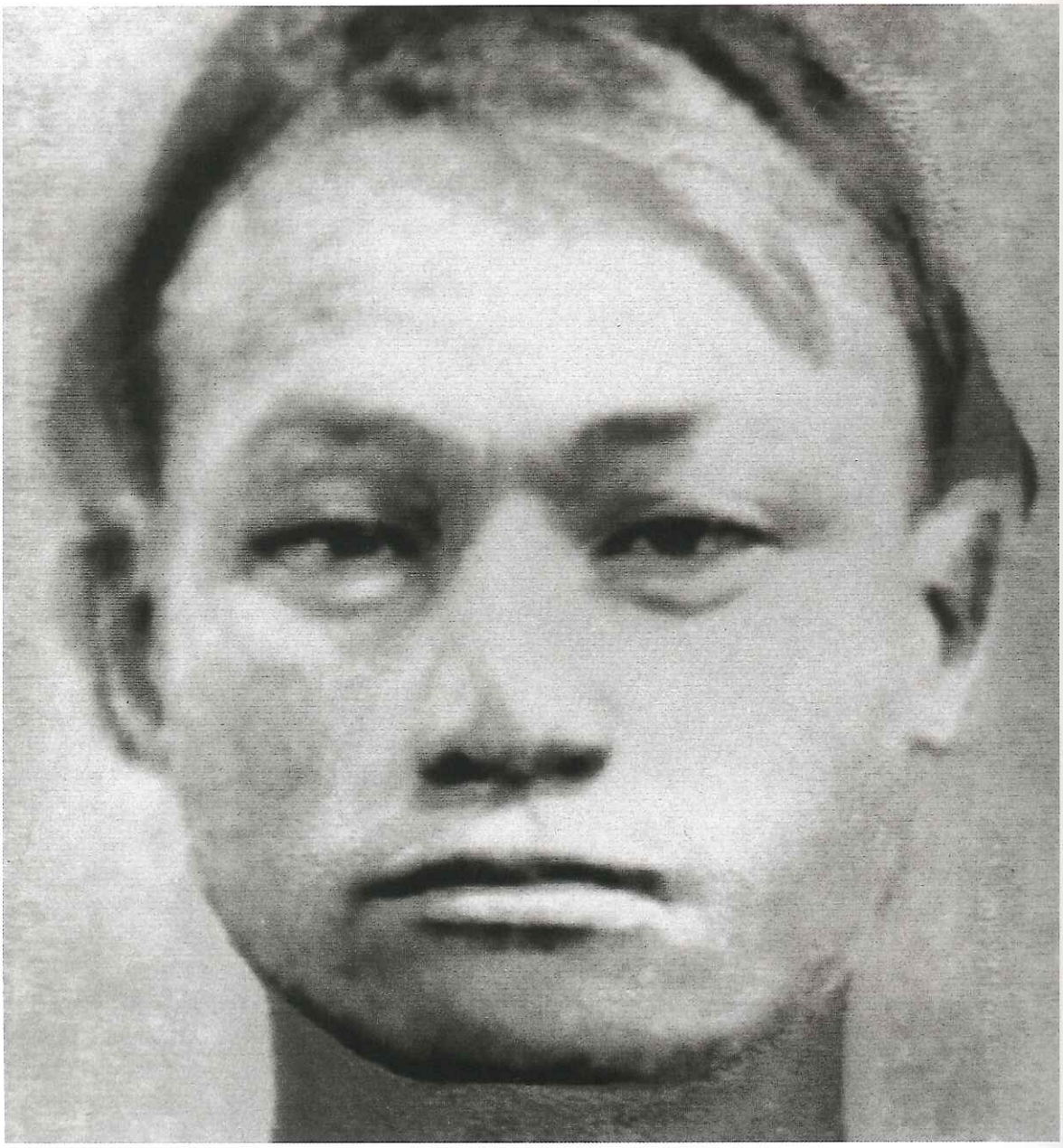
EDITED BY COCO FUSCO AND BRIAN WALLIS

ONLY SKIN DEEP



CHANGING VISIONS OF THE AMERICAN SELF



Jennifer González

Truth effects

As recording device, 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 indexical quality of the image and the connotations of naturalism that it implies.[1] 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 In this context of mass image production and exchange, questions of verisimilitude seem quaintly out of date. By the mid-nineties a number of anthologies and exhibition catalogues, notably *The Photographic Image in Digital Culture* (1995) and *Photography After Photography: Memory and Representation in the Digital Age* (1996)—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 distortion 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."[2]

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 insofar as it produces a photographic *effect*. Of course, as both historians and practitioners know, the truth effect of photography has real consequences—even when the image lies. Photography, as this 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.[3]

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

1. See, among others, Roland Barthes "Rhetoric of the Image" in *Image/Music/Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977).
2. For other discussions of the photographic image in digital culture, see *Digital Photography: Captured Images, Volatile Memory, New Montage* (San Francisco: SF Camerawork, 1988); *Impossible Presence: Surface and Screen in the Photogenic Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001); *Each Wild Idea: Writing, Photography, History* (2001); Peter Lunenfeld, *Snap to Grid: A User's Guide to Digital Arts, Media, and Cultures* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000).
3. Martha Rosler, "Image Simulations, Computer Manipulations: Some Considerations," in *Photography After Photography: Memory and Representation in the Digital Age* (Amsterdam: G+B Arts, 1996).

Nancy Burson, *Three Major Races (an Oriental, a Caucasian, and a Black)*, from the "Mankind" series, 1982. Gelatin silver print, 8 1/2 x 7 1/2 in. (21.5 x 19 cm). 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, Coco 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 genetic 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 delineate 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 *casta* 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 produces a Mulatto child." The categories were elaborate and precise, including variations such as the *criollo*, *mestizo*, *castizo*, *mulato*, *morisco*, *coyote*, *lobo*, *zambo*, and *torna-atras*, among others.[4] Given the passion for scientific categorization during the Enlightenment and the colonial imperative for an artificial means of creating class structure, this elaborate codification is not surprising. Rendered in paint it becomes a striking example of the deep desire to produce a parallel *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,

4. For an excellent discussion of *castas* paintings, see Maria Concepcion Garcia Saiz, *Las Castas Mexicanas: Un Género Pictórico Americano* (Italy: Olivetti, 1989).

or as the unquestioned framework for the family romance. And as with photography, the visual truth effect of 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 reified. 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."[5] 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 *self-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 *Mankind* is a composite portrait of three faces weighted according to demographic information about a world population that was "57 percent Oriental, 7 percent Black and 36 percent White." Three "typical" faces are presented as an anonymous computational portrait of a single individual. Its collapsing of normally distinct racial categories was intended as an antiracist 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

5. Paul Gilroy, *Against Race* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 35.

6. Vilém Flusser, "Nancy Burson: Chimaeras" in *Photography After Photography*, p. 152. See also, Allan Sekula, "The Body and the Archive" in *The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1989).

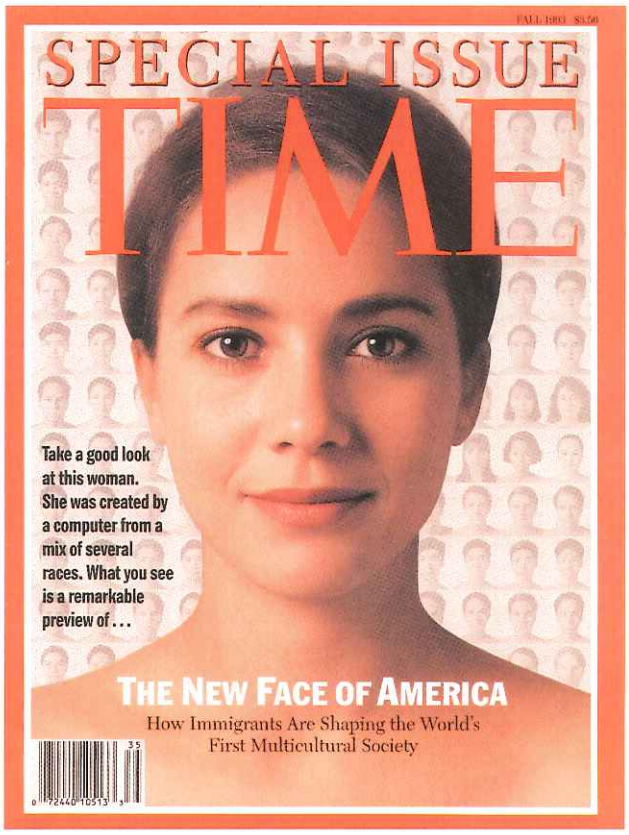
algorithms: *Age Machine*, *Anomaly Machine*, *Couples Machine*, and *Human Race Machine*. One has the choice of aging one's face, adding disfigurations, combining one's face with another person's, or seeing oneself with the facial characteristics of six different races. Burson claims that the *Human Race Machine* is her "prayer 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."[7] 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."[8] 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 cross-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 in earlier experiments in digital morphing seen first by the mainstream public in Michael Jackson's music video *Black or White* (1991) where he sings:

> *It's a turf war on a global scale/I'd rather hear both sides of the tale/See, it's not about races/Just places/ Faces/Where your blood comes from/Is were your space is/I've seen the bright get duller/I'm not going to spend 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

7. Lisa Nakamura, *Cybertypes* (New York: Routledge, 2002) p. 57. Emphasis added.
8. http://www.wolfmanproductions.com/racemachine.html

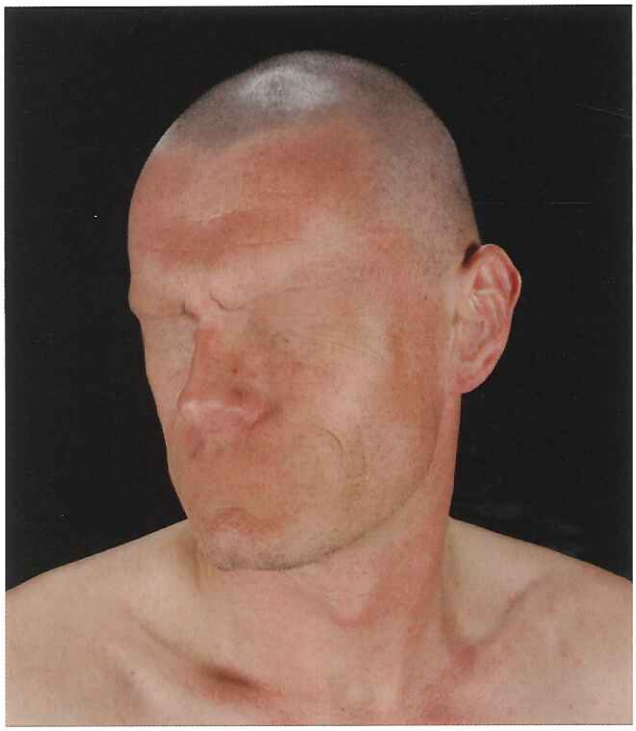


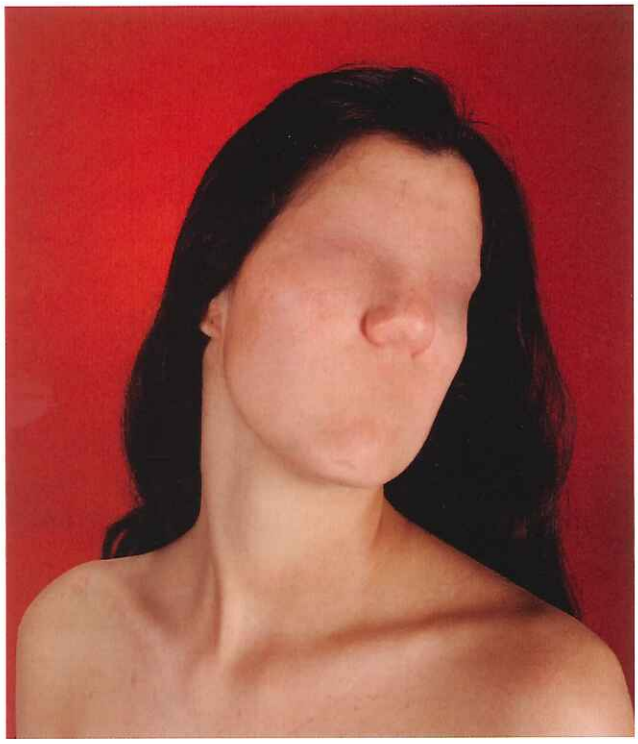
that appears to be entirely the result of the power of the image apparatus. As Peter Lunenfeld suggests, "As we move into the digital, the aesthetics of form become more and more involved in the aesthetics of mutable form."[9]

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 Gryphon 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."[10] The truth effect of photography not only visually demonstrated but also mechanically mimicked 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.

9. Lunenfeld, *Snap to Grid*, p. 65.
10. Donna Haraway, *Modest_Witness@Second_Mellinium. FemaleMan_Meets_OncoMouse™*, (New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 261.

Time, *Special Issue: The New Face of America*, Fall 1993. Photo: Ted Thai; computer morphing: Kin Wah Lam; design: Walter Bernard and Milton Glaser. Magazine. Private Collection.





Aziz + Cucher, *Chris*, 1994; *Maria*, 1994. Digitally altered chromogenic prints, each 50 x 40 in. (127 x 101.6 cm). Courtesy of the artists and Henry Urbach Architecture, New York.

What you see is a remarkable preview of... The New Face of America." Responding to the 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."[11] Also serving as an ideological reprise of the *casta* 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 Pygmalion fantasy, Haraway argues, the microchip and the computer program displace the human being as the origin of life.[12]

Such creationist desires to reformulate the human body abound in digital photography, some celebratory and others explicitly critical. Aziz+Cucher's "Dystopia" series of portraits in which human heads are devoid of any expressive feature or orifice represents a loss of personal identity that occurs as a result of new forms of digital communication. The artists write that "With the erasure of the primary facial features—eyes, nose, mouth, etc.—we intend to suggest an evolutionary change signifying the loss of individuality in the face of advancing technology and the progressive disappearance of face to face human interaction."[13] Looking like unformed creatures in a larval state, the portraits they construct are disturbingly blank yet remarkably individual. They elicit the uncanny, eerie sensation of seeing a body caught in the tragic limbo of genetic error. The unfinished subject, the underdeveloped social and sensory apparatus, signals the emptiness of the body as signifier in a world of digitally mediated communication.

Similarly disturbing are the works of Inez van Lamsweerde whose slick 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 untouchable. Smooth bodies without orifices, the hands, lips, and eyes of men, women, and children compiled into single portraits offer a dreamlike condensation of a forbidden unconscious imaginary. "Using the computer to quote plastic surgery," writes Collier 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."[14] 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 "flesh." She suggests that "despite their perfect dimensions, her figure's nudity is blank, spongy,

11. Ibid., p. 259.
12. Ibid., p. 261.
13. Aziz+Cucher, *Prospect: Photography in Contemporary Art* (Frankfurt am Main: Editions Stemmle, 1996), p. 36.
14. Collier Schorr, "Openings," in *Photography After Photography*, p. 214.

their Philip Pearlstein Caucasian flesh humming like a human doomsday machine."[15]

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 Mattel dolls looks like a wound or a scar branded on the skin.[16] A 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* links Christianity to notions of extreme purity, whether moral or racial,

15. Ibid.
16. Franklin Sirmans, "Get a Little Closer," *Artnet.com*, reviews, December 17, 1998.

Paul Pfeiffer, *Leviathan*, 1998. Digital chromogenic print, 36 x 84 in. (91.4 x 213.4 cm). Courtesy of The Project, New York.

which have finally reached a condition of corruption. Much of Pfeiffer'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 spectacle. By equating skin with architecture Pfeiffer asks us to consider the kinds of "pattern language" produced in the historical relations between bodies, religion, and the mapping of space.

Color balance

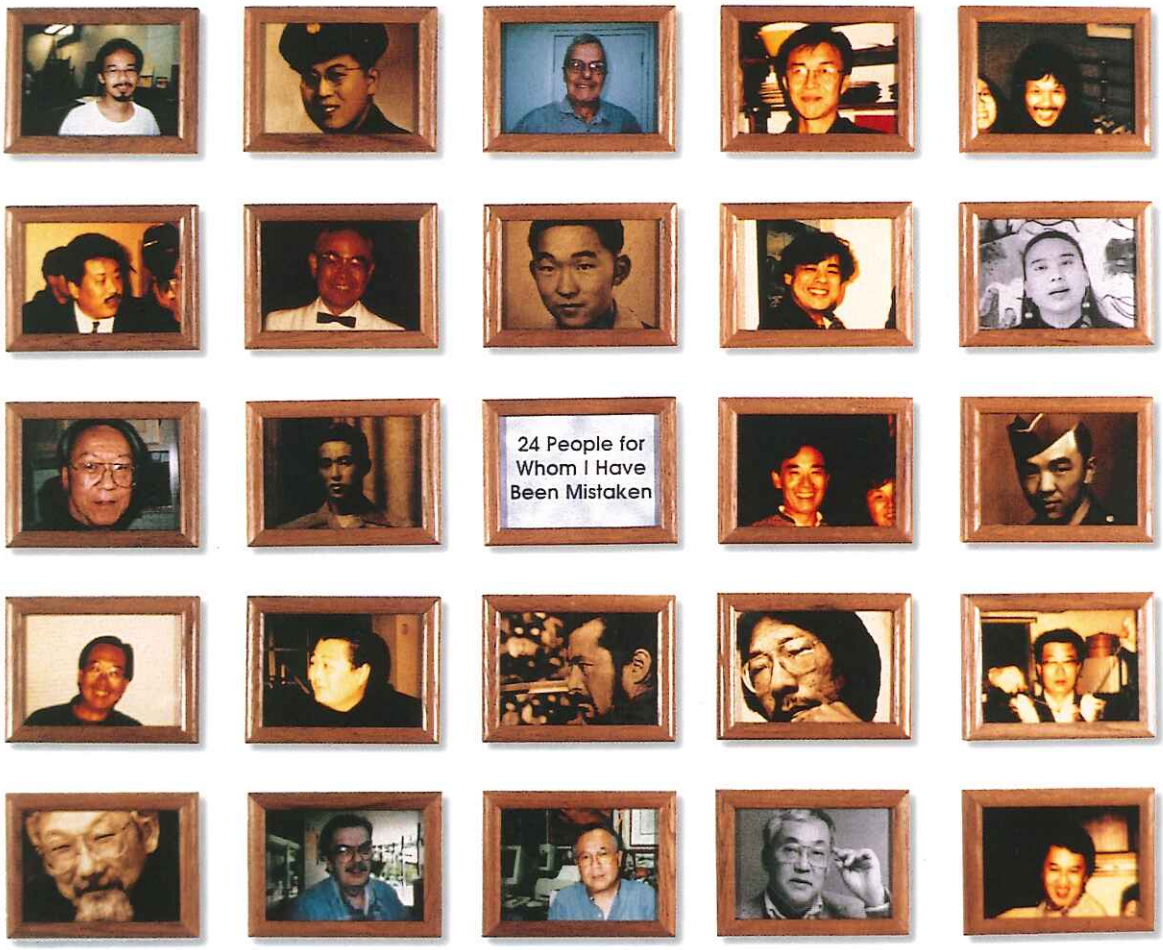
Technologies of visualization such as photography, film, and video have been mutually constitutive with conceptions of race. It is possible to observe this fact by tracing how technologies of image making have been invented and adapted to the purpose of better elaborating or accommodating racial discourses.[17] Racial hegemony 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 Bucher'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 Bucher'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."[18] If black skin creates "confusion" it is because neither the original design of the apparatus, nor common techniques for its use have taken blackness, or other nonwhite skin colors as a standard.[19]

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 practice. Alba D'Urbano, an Italian artist, used digital imaging techniques available in 1995 to produce a life-sized photographic representation of her own body. Printed on a tailor's pattern, the resulting

17. Stephen Jay Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man* (New York: Norton, 1996); *Colonialist Photography: Imaglin}ing Race and Place* (London: Routledge, 2002), etc.

18. New York Institute of Photography, www.nyip.com/tips/topic_peopleofcolor-0602.php, 2003.

19. Other amateur web sites offer instruction for digitally transforming the "yellow" tones in photographic images of Asians so they will have a rosier glow. Carl Volk's "Color Balancing Skin Tones," (http://www.carlvolk.com/photoshop 18.htm), reveals inherent racial bias when he writes, "In the photo of Christina above that beautiful China doll skin tone color may or may not be entirely *accurate* but the effect is very appealing—it looks (and feels) right." To change a skin color so that it "looks (and feels) right" begs the question of the cultural framework within which one can decide what a "right" skin color might be.



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."[20] Somewhat oblivious to the questions of race and passing that lie imbedded in her project, D'Urbano sought to address the idea of the body *as an image* reduced to a passive shell.[21] Digital photography acts in the service of a costume that "defines the contour of the image which forms on the retina of another person."[22] D'Urbano's project grasps the degree to which the subject is always *an image for an other*, 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 engages a parallel discourse, artist Keith Townsend Obadike, proposed to sell his "Blackness" on the commercial auction web site *eBay* in August 2001. Although the

20. Alba D'Urbano, "The Project: Hautnah, or Close to the Skin" in *Photography After Photography*, p. 270.
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid., p. 271.

Roger Shimomura, *24 People for Whom I Have Been Mistaken*, 1999. Chromogenic prints and wall text, twenty-four prints, each 5 x 7 in. (12.7 x 17.8 cm). Collection of David E. Schwartz. Courtesy of Greg Kucera Gallery, Seattle.

work makes reference to the history of slavery when black bodies stood on public auction blocks, Obadike is careful not to equate his cultural Blackness (with a capital "B") with a black body, even if this referent is part of its etymology. By not including a photograph, Obadike 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 "heirloom 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 'sista,' 'brotha,' 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 or Florida," or "by whites looking for a wild weekend."[23] Obadike 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, Obadike'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 sarcasm of Obadike'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 a site that raises 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 chat turns into a narrative farce of unsuccessful coitus, the souvenirs one can purchase are banal 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."[24] The text on the *Bindi Girl* site implies that for the South Asian woman in a Hindu culture, this "proper" place is either as a goddess or whore, the limited

23. For a link to this page see http://obadike.tripod.com/ebay.html.
24. Preema Murthy, http://www.thing.net/~bindigrl/.

range ascribed by a traditionally sexist cultural framework in the context of a booming new high-tech economy. *Bindi Girl* 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, Tana Hargest's digital project *Bitter Nigger Broadcast Network* (2002) 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 spoofs 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 BN Pharmaceutical line or the BN Product Division, both "committed to alleviating the bothersome effects of racism." BN Pharmaceutical lists among its products *Melinderm*, a Negro Teflon medicinal 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 racist remarks and behavior that subsequently slide right off. *Tominex*, 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 *Tominex* effectively removes the yearning for fairness or human decency.

If medications don't do the trick, the Product Division recommends the *Holo-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 *Holo-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, Hargest touts the compatibility of the *Holo-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* disarms its users with humor while revealing the banality of systematic racism.

A similar critique of racial inequities that uses a parody of technophilia 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 dystopic 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 Webopticon: Systema de Vigilancia." The image depicts a young Latino boy looking toward a future populated with computers, robots, and satellites. 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...."[25]

Race as a visual technology

In her forthcoming essay "Race as Technology," artist Beth Coleman suggests that race can be understood as a levered mechanism or "a function machine that has already articulated the race-prosthesis algorithm 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."[26] 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

25. See Los Cybrids, www.cybrids.com/artists.html.
26. Beth Coleman, "Race as Technology," an essay in progress. Cited with the author's permission, 2003.

Alex Rivera, *Why Cybraceros?*, 1997. Still from video. Courtesy of the artist.

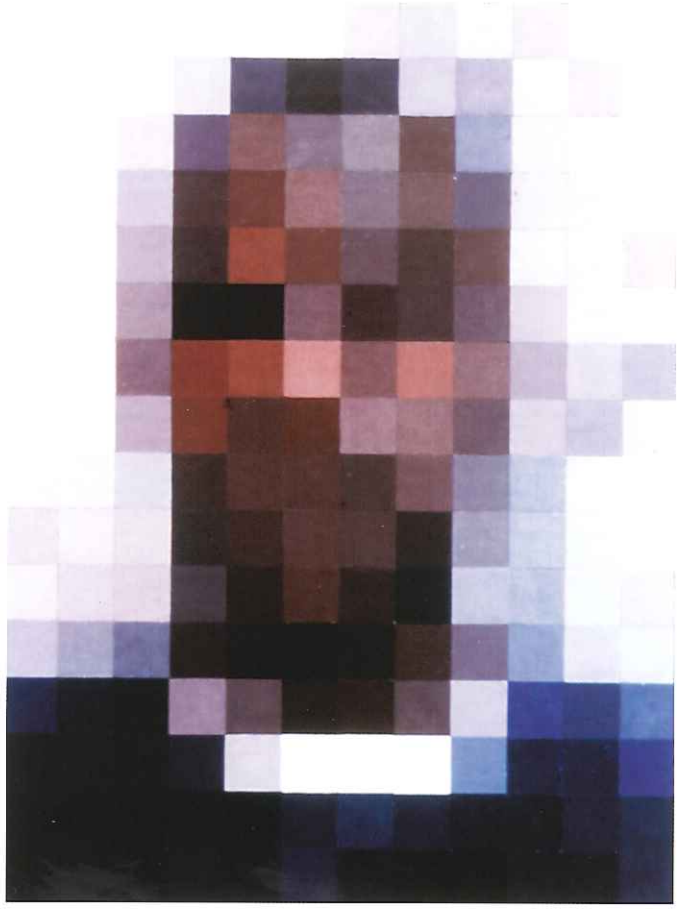
of ontological conditions. From this perspective, race as a "levered mechanism" can be seen to operate across historical, social, and cultural practices that are geared to carry out operations following a systemic logic.

Some theorists 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.[27] While such pronouncements 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 ideological but also phenomenological or even ontological. Our bodies and psyches will become integrated, it is suggested, with systems of information and surveillance, microchips, and nano-technologies. 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 atomization 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 micro-processes invisible to the naked eye. Identity and identification become literally more than skin deep when one is defined by genetic code.

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 scales respectively associated with political anatomy and epidermalization."[28] 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 brutal simplicity of racial typology still plays itself out in the most basic ways as public forms of violence.[29] For Gilroy it is necessary to find a way to produce an antiracist discourse in *Against Race* that does not simultaneously perpetuate the reification 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 "epidermalization" are no longer legitimate, that the concept of race and its truth effect are still ensnared 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

27. See Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2000).
28. Paul Gilroy, *Against Race* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 47.
29. Ibid., p. 51.



"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 intertexual mechanisms tying the present to the past through new and familiar systems of representation. Artists such as those mentioned here explore this intertextuality 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.

Kori Newkirk, *Channel 11*, 1999. Encaustic on wood panel, 65 1/4 x 49 in. (165. 7 x 124.4 cm). Courtesy of The Project, New York.