Joiri Minaya: Of Undoing Images

Flat muscular stomachs, headless wet torsos, crossed legs, long hair, floating hands, breasts, and buttocks all printed on foamcore hang from a gallery's ceiling. These body parts are interrupted by illustrations of pineapples, palm trees and leaves, orchids and hibiscus that are printed on the back of the pieces of foamcore. For *#dominicanwomengooglesearch* (2016), first installed at the Wave Hill Project Space in the Bronx, New York, artist Joiri Minaya used images found during a Google search for "Dominican women." Amateur photographs that she identified as "representations that are exotic and obedient to foreign fantasies, yet seemingly assertive and self-confident" were chosen from the search results. From these low-resolution images Minaya digitally excised specific body parts using Photoshop, later blowing them up so that she could print them at human scale.[1] In the installation, one sees printed images of various female body parts hanging from the ceiling; on the verso appear colorful, tropical flower-patterned fabrics.[2]

The work's appeal resides in its play between the indexical and the phantasmagoric[3] qualities of digital images––and of the female bodies depicted in them. While the cutouts are printed at human scale, Minaya retains the digital pixilation that results from their enlargement, reminding viewers that these are low-quality images made for screens. Their silhouette-like appearance nevertheless lifts them temporarily out of cyberspace, and even as fragments, the images achieve a bodily presence: they become sculptural objects that relate to the space around them. As visitors move through the installation, they mingle among and bump into the silhouettes, engaging in a physical interaction. The installation gives the impression of walking into a children's paper doll book where various body parts are available to pick and "wear." The silhouettes are, in effect, materialized *appended subjects*. [4]

The historian and critic Jennifer González describes an appended subject as an electronic addendum to a person—a "principal body"—who lives in the real world. In the realm of cyberspace, a "principal body" can take on a variety of digital appendages, be they psychological traits or physical attributes. Minaya's work alludes to a type of interactivity common in digital spaces, such as cosmetic-industry websites, where one can customize one's appearance in terms of gender and features like hair or facial makeup. But the work also suggests that Minaya's female silhouettes can adhere to subjects in the real world, like accessories that can be shuffled around in order to break and remake one's body and identity. They evoke commodities for sale, like enlarged earrings waiting to be tried on, or, as the artist suggests, like pieces of meat in a butcher's shop.[5] Minaya's *appended subjects* promise to serve women who inhabit both cyber- and physical spaces.[6]

The artificial subjectivity performed through appendage also speaks to the phantasmagoric nature of digital images. Even when they bear the imprint of the physical world, digital images are often so intensively manipulated––altered, stretched, distorted––that they lose the connection to their physical origins. Displayed on and produced for screens, digital images intensify the mobility and exchangeability that have always been key features of photography. Moreover, their ephemeral existence on social media as bits of code rather than printed images further erodes their connection to real-world experience. Moving past Walter Benjamin's lost aura––caused by the mechanized reproduction of images––one might ask how the vaporization of a photograph's physical reality through digital technologies affects viewers' understanding of the image. As mere codes inside apparatuses, we cannot hold on to digital images—or can we? [7]

The manner by which Minaya collected her images also calls into question their reliability as visual documents. To date, no Google search can certify whether the women selected by Minaya from the image-search results are or are not Dominican. A blind spot persists between data available through Google about these women's images and their actual geographical locations or social conditions. The "automatization" of programming methods such as algorithms and the "neutrality" enacted by search engines' interfaces can mislead users into thinking the results of an image search are unmediated, randomized, or even serendipitous. But Minaya reveals that those images belong to an intricate system that manufactures the category "Dominican women."

If one follows Minaya's cue and searches for "Dominican women" on Google, the results look like a tableau of photographs of available women: an album of "real women" who inhabit "real" spaces. Most women in the photographs are brown or black skinned. Their assertive gazes might suggest empowerment, but numerous images belong to "dating websites" and follow a visual standardization that discloses their staging and production: the dating website "mydominicanlove.com," for instance, features images of women striking poses (similar to those seen in Minaya's work) and

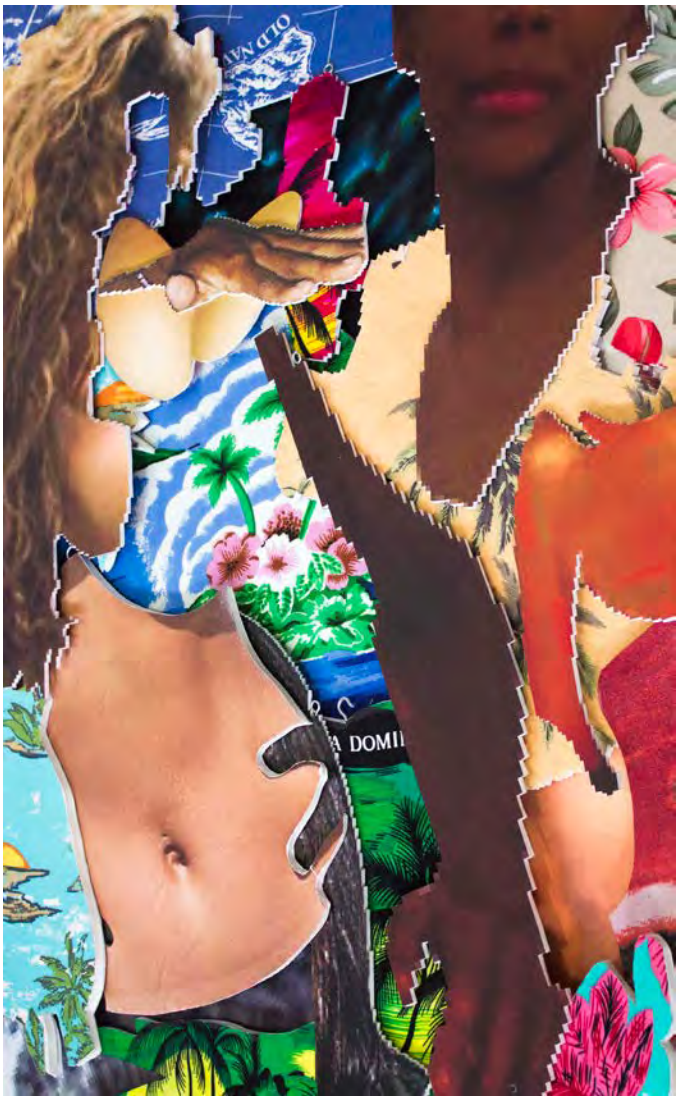

Fig. 1 **Joiri Minaya (Dominican Republic, b. United States, 1990), detail of *#dominicanwomengooglesearch*, 2016. Digital print on sintra and fabric collage, approx. 6 x 15 x 12 ft. (3.65 x 4.57 x 3.65 m). Courtesy of the artist.**

looking directly at the camera. Some wear swimsuits and reside in domestic settings, such as living rooms or bedrooms. Labels showing their names and ages appear below image thumbnails. An additional appended item to these women is the tagging provided by Google that comes along with image-search results: words such as "hotty," "hot," and "voluptuous" are among the first to appear on the horizontal list of Google tags just above the tableau of pictures.

Minaya has stated in an interview that it would be a different scenario if these images were selfies, which would perhaps convey a sense of their self-empowerment; instead, what one sees are websites and a great number of images that operate within a sex industry. Adult prostitution is legal in the Dominican Republic, and the country has instituted legislation that seeks to protect sex workers' rights. Nonetheless, what one sees after a Google search is not the self-representation of women seeking a date or of sex-workers but a seemingly neutral visual arrangement of women's bodies in cyberspace that is directly complicit with a very real capitalization of their bodies.[8]

As Steven Gregory's research reveals, over the past three decades the Dominican economy has shifted from domestic agricultural production and manufacturing to "tourism and the labor-intensive processing of exports in free trade zones."[9] These new industries rely heavily on the exploitation of women's labor, which has exacerbated sexual abuse in local companies with a high percentage of women employees. These transformations to the economy coincide with the growth of US-based sex tourism websites that promote themselves through photography and video. The cyber-world of dating websites and tourist-driven advertising campaigns exaggerates and abets human transactions that occur in the real world. Minaya's installation makes this codependence explicit by offering an encounter with phantomlike sirens that entice viewers' touch.[10] By reusing digital sources that implicitly refer to this sex industry in the Dominican Republic, Minaya's work questions political and racial relations that are centuries old, rooted in colonial relationships but also present in neocolonial US-Dominican Republic exchanges: discourses on the raced female body that predate the Internet and hover above Dominican women, as well as above Latinas and Latin American women.[11]

From Brazilian star Carmen Miranda's fruit hats to images of women in tiny swimsuits strolling along white sand beaches in high-end resorts, the "tropical" as a Western construct continues to intertwine the natural landscape with the female

body. The history of image production in the Americas, and especially in Latin America and the Caribbean—exemplified by sixteenth-century colonial explorers' meticulous engravings and nineteenth-century ethnographic photographs—has molded the ways in which these regions have been both feared and desired by the West. Human bodies and nature were the first elements upon which the colonial project fixed its gaze. Knowledge had to be produced about this alien world, a type of knowledge shaped by an eagerness to catalogue, categorize, archive, and then finally pass moral judgment on all that appeared to the positivist eye. The colonizer, the modern imperialist, and now the neoliberal entrepreneur continue this perverse legacy of coupling women with nature.

Black and brown female bodies throughout Latin America and the Caribbean have played a primary role in nourishing the imaginations of tourists, from the industry's origins in the nineteenth century to our global times. As a phantom of the colonial project, the idea of the "tropical" serves as a protective screen through which tourists enter a realm of pleasure achieved by being in touch with racial otherness. The tropical fabrics in Minaya's work operate as tourist-luring camouflage and interpolate race and nature, speaking to the Dominican Republic's colonial past and to the secrecy embedded in the formation of race and cultural difference throughout Latin America: the tropical becomes a second skin attached to the women's fragmented images.[12]

In Minaya's work the tropical "skin" is re-signified through a cyber-touristic imaginary—an additional appendage to those women's images. As Jennifer González reminds us, it is through the skin, that the drama of race has been enacted in the quotidian of colonial societies. Racial schemas participate in a system of "common knowledge" that masks "not only individuals as individuals but also their real and imagined historical conditions." Minaya's tropical patterns, enveloping raced bodies, enact the ambivalent hide-and-seek stereotyping game––of fear and desire––that historically has both empowered and defied racial difference.[13]

The visuality of "tropicalness" becomes an additional sign to entice one's imagination, a marker of mystery carved into the appended subject's (online or offline) skin, a coating to be peeled off from images only to reveal an empty shell, barren of meaning, a convenient void for the continuation of the universalizing gaze and its nefarious capitalizations. Minaya collects bodies from the Internet to then refabricate the virtual forms of scopic power that had been appended to them.
—TATIANE SANTA ROSA

1 Joiri Minaya was born in the United States in 1990 and grew up in the Dominican Republic. Based in New York, she has exhibited in the United States and the Dominican Republic. A description of *#dominicanwomengooglesearch* appears on the artist's official website, http://www.joiriminaya.com/dominicanwomengooglesearch.

2 Ibid.

3 "Phantasmagoric" refers to *fantasmagories*, or phantasmagorias: a type of entertainment that became popular across Europe during the nineteenth century and forecasted the emergence of the modern motion picture. As spectacles, phantasmagorias' success relied on the flickering nature of the magic lantern's projections and on the illusion of image-embodiment and confrontation. Scholar Terry Castle posits a relationship between phantasmagorias and the traumatic effects of the French Revolution, discussing how these spectacles became metaphors in literary romanticism, using as examples the writings of Poe, Baudelaire, and Proust. Castle concludes, "The epistemologically unstable, potentially fantastic metaphor of the phantasmagoria simply condensed the historical paradox: by relocating the world of ghosts in the closed space of the imagination, one ended up supernaturalizing the mind itself." Here, I think of digital images as phantasmagoric for their spectacularization on mobile screens and social media: the ways through which digital images attempt to bridge cyber- and physical spaces. Minaya's work can be thought of as a phantasmagoric spectacle as well, but instead of using a magic lantern to bring us face to face with "ghosts," we confront fragmented female bodies that are phantasmagoric through the numerous colonial discourses that produced their idealization. Terry Castle, "Phantasmagoria: Spectral Technology and the Metaphorics of Modern Reverie," *Critical Inquiry* (1988): 52.

4 Artist Hito Steyerl has often used the notion of the "poor or low quality image" as a conceptual framework for her works: "Poor images are dragged around the globe as commodities or their effigies, as gifts or as bounty. They spread pleasure or death threats, conspiracy theories or bootlegs, resistance or stultification. Poor images show the rare, the obvious, and the unbelievable—that is, if we can still manage to decipher it." Hito Steyerl, "In Defense of the Poor Image," *E-Flux Journal* 10 (November 2009), http://www.e-flux.com/journal/10/61362/in-defense-of-the-poor-image/.

5 Joiri Minaya, Martha Naranjo Sandoval, and Groana Melendez, "Interview with Joiri Minaya," *Baxter St Camera Club of New York*, October 13, 2016, http://www.baxterst.org/2016/10/13/interview-with-joiri-minaya/.

6 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." Jennifer González, "The Appended Subject: Race and Identity as Digital Assemblage," in *Race in Cyberspace* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 27–50.

7 According to Vilém Flusser (1920–1991), in order to decode technical images (those made by apparatuses, such as a photographic camera or a computer) it is necessary to understand not only the image but also the nature of the apparatus that produced it, the programs that rule these apparatuses, and the information produced by the entire system. For him, the lack of criticism of technical images was problematic due to the progressive substitution of texts by technical images: "This apparently non-symbolic, objective character of technical images leads whoever looks at them to see them not as images but as windows. Observers thus do not believe them as images, but as ways of looking at the world (to

the extent that they criticize them all.). Their criticism is not an analysis of their production but an analysis of the world." Vilém Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (London: Reaktion, 2000), 15.

8 Minaya, Sandoval, and Melendez, "Interview."

9 Steven Gregory, *The Devil behind the Mirror Globalization and Politics in the Dominican Republic* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 136–39.

10 According to Steven Gregory, one US-based website devoted to male sex tourism, tsmtravel.com, has 6,000 paid subscribers. Of US-Dominican relations, he says export-processing and sex-tourism industries "have both shaped and been shaped by practices of gender subordination that situate Dominican women within the global economy as 'natural' subjects of labor and sex/gender exploitation." Ibid.

11 An estimated 1 million Dominicans live in the United States. In 2007 the United States implemented a free-trade agreement with the Dominican Republic and Central America known as CAFTA-DR, which curbs US exports to these regions. Due to a history of US intervention, the Dominican Republican has often been considered a backyard for US exploitation, including tourism and goods exportation.

12 The American-born, Dominican-raised Minaya often uses her own body to comment on the conflation of the tropical and the female. The artist has deployed camouflage and fragmentation in many of her performances and photo-collages. Here, camouflage might also refer to a history of US interventions in the Caribbean and Latin America. One legacy of the 1965 US intervention in the Dominican Republic has been the military and diplomatic accords between the two nations. After the mobilization of Dominicans to fight in the US-led Iraq war in the 2000s, these agreements have focused on counter-narcotics efforts and the combating of illegal immigration between Haiti and Dominican Republic––neighboring countries that have developed tense social and political relationships over the last decades. Other female artists, such as Firelei Báez, either interested in or working in the Caribbean, have alluded to the fragmentation of the female body in order to discuss its idealization. Writing in the exhibition catalogue *Disillusions: Gendered Visions of the Caribbean and its Diasporas*, Michelle Stephens suggests a consensus among artists' intent "to subject fantasies and fables of the feminine, and idealized constructions of the female body, to the creative forces of fracture, fragmentation, cutting, scratching, enlargement and augmentation." Michelle Stephens, "The Fantasy in Bits and Pieces: The Illusory Body of the Caribbean/Female Artist," in *Disillusions: Gendered Visions of the Caribbean and Its Diasporas*, ed. Tatiana Flores (Edison, NJ: Studio Theatre Gallery, Middlesex County College, 2011), e-book, 26–41.

13 Jennifer González, "The Face and the Public: Race, Secrecy, and Digital Art Practice," *Camera Obscura* 24, no. 1 (2009): 59.